



Psalm 99 - Praise to God for His Holiness

Introduction

This is another hymn celebrating God's kingship over all his creation, this time focusing on his exalted holiness and the wonder that he has made a way for his people to come into his presence without danger. Although the emphasis falls specifically on God's covenant people, Israel, the element of universal hope for the Gentiles is also present: vv.2-3 express the wish that 'all the peoples' might praise the great and awesome name of the Lord.

This Psalm, without title in the Hebrew text, is a three-time proclamation of God's holiness, as Isaiah would later do: <<And one called to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory'>> (Isaiah 6:3).

Psalm 99:1-5 - The Lord Is a Holy and Majestic King.

The first section stresses the stunning majesty of God's kingship: he reigns and is enthroned upon the cherubim ((v.1), he is great and is exalted over all the peoples (v.2), and he is holy. It also emphasises the proper human response to him: let the peoples tremble (v.1), let the people praise his great and awesome name (vv.2-3), and the people should exalt the Lord and worship (v.5).

Verses 3 and 5 repeat the phrase 'holy is he': the Lord is spotlessly pure and righteous, and separate above his creation. This universal God has made himself known in Zion and has established his just and gracious rule in Jacob: here among his chosen people, Israel, the perfect kingship of God is supposed to be on display. The place of worship, i.e. the sanctuary, is God's footstool: <<***Then King David rose to his feet and said: 'Hear me, my brothers and my people. I had planned to build a house of rest for the ark of the covenant of the Lord, for the footstool of our God; and I made preparations for building'***>> (1 Chronicles 28:2), and: <<***Let us go to his dwelling-place; let us worship at his footstool***>>

(Psalm 132:7), in keeping with the royal image, where God the universal king is the acknowledged king over his people.

¹ The Lord is king; let the peoples tremble!

He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!

Psalm 99:1

The Lord is king or the Lord reigns. For the third time, a psalm begins with this phrase; refer also to Psalm 93:1 and 97:1. Psalm 99 speaks of God's presence for he sits enthroned upon the cherubim, but in his presence he reigns. God is not simply there; he is a reigning king.

Let the peoples tremble! This may be simply the humble response to God's majesty; but, in view of the interest in Zion (v.2) and Jacob (v.4), i.e. in God's people Israel, it probably also stresses that the Gentiles should fear to harm God's own people: <<*The peoples heard, they trembled; pangs seized the inhabitants of Philistia*>> (Exodus 15:14), and: <<*This day I will begin to put the dread and fear of you upon the peoples everywhere under heaven; when they hear report of you, they will tremble and be in anguish because of you*>> (Deuteronomy 2:25) and should instead join them in worship: <<*Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering, and come into his courts. Worship the Lord in holy splendour; tremble before him, all the earth*>> (Psalm 96:7-9).

He sits enthroned upon the cherubim. The idea is that God is enthroned in his sanctuary. It is difficult to say whether the psalmist had in mind the heavenly sanctuary of God or the earthly representation of it, i.e. the tabernacle or temple; both are true and either one fits. Refer to the comment made on Psalm 80:1.

² The Lord is great in Zion;

he is exalted over all the peoples.

³ Let them praise your great and awesome name.

Holy is he!

Psalm 99:2-3

The Lord is great in Zion. God is present in heaven and in all the earth, but has special regard for Zion, the city of Jerusalem: <<*Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God*>> (Psalm 48:1a). In that city set in the hills, he is exalted over all the peoples.

Let them praise your great and awesome name. God rightfully receives praise because of his greatness and because he is holy: <<*In Judah God is known, his name is great in Israel*>> (Psalm 76:1)

Holy is he! Holiness, at its root, has the idea of apartness. It describes someone, or something, which is set apart from other people or things. An object can be holy if it is set apart for sacred service. A person is holy if they are set apart for God's will and purpose.

God himself is set apart in many senses. He is set apart from creation, in that the Lord God is not a creature and he exists outside of all creation. If all creation were to dissolve, the Lord God would remain. He is set apart from humanity, in that his nature or essence is divine, not human. God is not a super-man or the ultimate man. God is not merely smarter than any man, stronger than any man, older than any man, or better than any man. God cannot be measured on man's chart at all. He is divine and humans are not.

God's holiness is a part of everything he is and does. God's power is a holy power. God's love is a holy love. God's wisdom is a holy wisdom. God's judgement is a holy judgement. Holiness is not an aspect of God's personality; it is one characteristic of his entire being.

⁴ Mighty King, lover of justice,
 you have established equity;
 you have executed justice
 and righteousness in Jacob.

Psalm 99:4

Mighty King, lover of justice. The might that this king wields is directed entirely to good and pure ends. In the true God there is absolute might combined with absolute right, and this endears him to his faithful worshippers. On the idea of God's just rule, refer to the comment made on Psalm 96.

You have executed justice. With God, justice and equity are not mere slogans or promises. He has executed justice among his people and in the world, and will continue to do so. Charles Spurgeon commented, "Most kingdoms have an establishment of some kind, and generally it is inequitable; here we have an establishment which is equity itself. The Lord our God demolishes every system of injustice, and right alone is made to stand." And again, "That king-craft which delights in cunning, favouritism, and brute force is as opposite to the divine kingship as darkness to light. The palace of Jehovah is no robber's fortress nor despot's castle, built on dungeons, with stones carved by slaves, and cemented with the blood of toiling serfs."

5 Extol the Lord our God;
worship at his footstool.
Holy is he!

Psalm 99:5

Extol the Lord our God is repeated in v.9. The Lord is exalted, i.e. high in majesty, and people are to exalt him, that is, they are to honour God for his high majesty. Understanding the power, holiness, and goodness of God should lead believers to exalt him and to humbly worship him.

Worship at his footstool. Most commentators regard this as the Ark of the Covenant, connected to their understanding of between the cherubim in v.1. The Ark of the Covenant is called his footstool in 1 Chronicles 28:2, but so is the earth: <<*Thus says the Lord: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool; what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting-place?>> (Isaiah 66:1), <<But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is his footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King>> (Matthew 5:34-35), <<Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest?>> (Acts 7:49), and Jerusalem as a whole: <<How the Lord in his anger has humiliated daughter Zion! He has thrown down from heaven to earth the splendour of Israel; he has not remembered his footstool on the day of his anger>> (Lamentations 2:1).*

It should be remembered, however, that the ark was kept in the most holy place where only the high priest could enter and then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. Therefore, it seems more likely that the worshippers were called to God's sanctuary, i.e. the tabernacle or the temple.

Holy is he! The phrase from v.3 is repeated for emphasis. God is holy in all he is and all he does. Spurgeon also commented, "Holiness is the harmony of all the virtues. The Lord has not one glorious attribute alone, or in excess, but all glories are in him as a whole; this is the crown of his honour and the honour of his crown. His power is not his choicest jewel, nor his sovereignty, but his holiness."

Psalm 99:6-9 - The Holy God Has Provided for His People to Worship Him.

The first section described the exalted holiness of the one true God and hinted at the privilege of the chosen people. This section explores more of the wonder of what it means to be God's people, whom he actually welcomes into his presence.

In mentioning Moses, Aaron and Samuel in v.6, the psalm reminds its singers of how these men were God's gifts to lead his people. Here they further serve as examples of those who called to the Lord and he answered them, and who kept his decrees

and his statute. Those of God's faithful who heed the call to worship at his holy mountain can be sure that God has preserved his people through such servants as these and has called each of his people to a similar life of faith and obedience.

- ⁶ Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel also was among those who called on his name.
They cried to the Lord, and he answered them.
- ⁷ He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud;
they kept his decrees,
and the statutes that he gave them.

Psalm 99:6-7

Moses and Aaron were among his priests. The psalmist listed three notable priests in the history of Israel: Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. These were men who prayed, i.e. who called on his name, and God revealed himself when he answered them.

He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud. The pillar of cloud was the physical representation of God's presence with Israel in the wilderness and God spoke to Moses from that cloudy pillar: <<*When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses*>> (Exodus 33:9).

They kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them. The psalmist noted the general obedience of Moses, Aaron and Samuel.

- ⁸ O Lord our God, you answered them;
you were a forgiving God to them,
but an avenger of their wrongdoings.
- ⁹ Extol the Lord our God,
and worship at his holy mountain;
for the Lord our God is holy.

Psalm 99:8-9

You were a forgiving God to them. God describes himself this way: <<*The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and*

transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation'>> (Exodus 34:6-7), and his people, even the best of them, i.e. Moses, Aaron and Samuel, rely on this and not their own moral excellence, as their confidence.

An avenger of their wrongdoings. Although this could be taken to mean that God avenges the wrong done to them: <<*Praise, O heavens, his people, worship him, all you gods! For he will avenge the blood of his children, and take vengeance on his adversaries; he will repay those who hate him, and cleanse the land for his people*>> (Deuteronomy 32:43), it is better to see it as affirming that God 'avenges' the wrong committed by his people, chastising them in order to help them on to greater holiness. The God described here forgives his people, not because he is indifferent to their moral condition but so that they can have the joy of ever-deepening moral excellence.

Extol the Lord our God. The psalmist commands this for a second time; refer to the comment made at v.5.

And worship at his holy mountain. This can be the mountain on which Jerusalem sits: <<*On the holy mount stands the city he founded*>> (Psalm 87:1), or more specifically, the mountain where the temple is located: <<*O Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?*>> (Psalm 15:1). Observe how this verse echoes v.5.

For the Lord our God is holy. For the emphatic third time God's holiness is proclaimed. Later, in heavenly visions, the prophet: <<*Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory*>> (Isaiah 6:3b) and Apostle John: <<*Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come*>> (Revelation 4:8b) would hear this three-time declaration of holiness combined into a single sentence.