

Psalm 149 picks up where Psalm 148 left off in praise to the Lord who “has raised up for his people a horn” (Ps 148:14). The psalmist develops the arc of salvation history from creation to judgment. The invitation to praise goes out to all the world and ends in judgment against the nations, peoples, kings, and nobles that refuse to praise the name of the Lord. Psalm 149 celebrates the triumph of all those who have put their trust in God’s redemptive love. These are the Lord’s faithful people, the saints, God’s holy ones (Ps 149:1, 5, 9), who “have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10).

For today’s believer living between the Hallelujahs means living between the advents. The first advent was the coming of the Messiah, the Suffering Servant, who was “led like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isa 53:7). The second advent will be the return of the Messiah in victory. He is the one who is called “Faithful and True,” the “King of kings and Lord of lords” (Rev 19:11,16). Psalm 149 looks forward to the day of final judgment when the Lord will judge the nations with justice and righteousness. This eschatological psalm calls the saints to sing a new song *today* in anticipation of the Lord’s ultimate victory *tomorrow*. Psalm 149 celebrates the final judgment that will put all things right and put an end to evil once and for all.

If these closing Hallel Psalms were composed and prayed by refugees returning from exile then the exhortation for the people of Zion to be glad in their King carries a transcendent meaning. The kingdom envisioned by the psalmist goes beyond Jerusalem’s walls and Israel’s borders and extends to all nations and all peoples under the rule and reign of God. Israel’s humiliation becomes key to her exaltation. The faithful people of Zion are gathered from all the nations and they rejoice in their divine King.

The theme of Psalm 149 corresponds to Jesus’ inaugural sermon from Isaiah 61. Several key words in the psalm correspond to Isaiah’s prophecy. These include “the humble” or “the lowly” (Ps 149:4; Isa 61:1), “vengeance” (Ps 149:7; Isa 61:2). “crowns” or “honors” (from the stem of the word for “glory” (Ps 149:4; Isa 61:3); “Zion” (Ps 149:2; Isa 61:3); “judgment” or “sentence” (Ps 149:9; Isa 61:8).¹ The reason for praise is that the Lord delights in his people and the greatest measure of that delight is in the coming of Jesus Christ. He is the reason we dance and make music.

The Humble Sing a New Song

*Praise the Lord.
Sing to the Lord a new song,
his praise in the assembly of his faithful people [saints].
Let Israel rejoice in their Maker;
let the people of Zion be glad in their King.
Let them praise his name with dancing
and make music to him with timbrel and harp.*

¹ Allen, Psalms, 319.

*For the Lord takes delight in his people;
he crowns the humble with victory.
Let his faithful people [saints] rejoice in this honor
and sing for joy on their beds.*

Psalm 149:1-5

The exhortation to sing a new song inspires creative exuberance and meaningful praise. Worship suffers when we substitute mind-numbing routine and formulaic language for thoughtful praise. New covenant prophecy demanded a new song, sung by the people of Zion with genuine joy and delight. We share in this praise today. True Word-centered doxology expresses and evokes meanings which are at once intellectual, emotional, volitional, and spiritual.² We commit to memory hymns and songs of praise. The melody and lyrics fill our soul with joy. We tune up the instruments for these songs of praise and join in the lively dance. “Every mode of expressing delight was bound to be employed,” wrote Spurgeon. “Dancing, singing, and playing on instruments were all called into requisition, and most fitly so. . . . When the Lord saves a soul its holy joy overflows, and it cannot find channels enough for its exceeding gratitude.”³

The psalmist does not limit this meaningful worship to church services in the household of faith, but describes the saints singing for joy on their beds. “Whether this means that we cannot sleep for joy, or that we can sleep (that is, sleep in safety)” raises two interesting possibilities.⁴ Augustine drew out the significance of believers rejoicing in private as opposed to rejoicing in theaters or at stadiums or parties.⁵ Away from all the hype and cultural stimuli the measure of a person’s genuine praise to God becomes evident. The greater joy belongs in the believer’s inner devotion to God found in those private and personal moments when the testimony of our true self is revealed. God-honoring public worship has its source in meaningful personal worship. “When you pray,” Jesus said, “go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you” (Matthew 6:6). Saints who sing for joy on their beds find it difficult to complain about other believers. True devotion helps to internalize the fruit of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal 5:22-23).

The Humble Wield The Sword

*May the praise of God be in their mouths
and a double-edged sword in their hands,
to inflict vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,
to bind their kings with fetters,
their nobles with shackles of iron,
to carry out the sentence written against them –
this is the glory of all his faithful people [saints].*

² Webster, Preaching Hebrews, 17.

³ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Psalm 149.

⁴ Wilcock, Psalms, 283.

⁵ Augustine, Psalms, 679.

Praise the Lord.

Psalm 149:6-9

In the second section the psalmist develops what it means for the Lord to “crown the humble with victory” (Ps 149:4). The picture of the saints singing praises to the Lord while wielding a powerful sword that inflicts vengeance on the nations seems at first glance contradictory. Given that the psalm was probably first prayed by returning exiles who were faced with the daunting challenge of rebuilding the city out of the ruins of a once proud nation, the notion of world conquest seems arrogant and not in keeping with the *humble* being crowned with victory.⁶ But if the psalm offers an eschatological perspective of the Lord’s future judgment and victory arising from a people who were destined to bless the nations (Gen 12:3), and that this was to be done, “‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the Lord Almighty” (Zech 4:6), then we see a transcendent purpose behind the militant metaphors. With the praise of God in their mouths and the “double-mouthed” sword in their hands, the saints are empowered by the truth of God to devour the opposition.

One wonders if the author of the Book of Hebrews did not have the “double-edged sword” of Psalm 149 in mind when he wrote that “the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to the dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart” (Heb 4:12). The glory of the saints is not secured by taking up arms and fighting the world on its terms. “For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor 10:3-5; see Eph 6).

Inflicting vengeance on the nations, binding kings with fetters, and nobles with shackles is metaphoric language for the binding of evil and the victory of the Lord. The psalmist takes us back to the beginning of the Psalter and the promise: “You will break them with a rod of iron; you will dash them to pieces like pottery” (Ps 2:9). The Holy Spirit takes us forward to the binding of Satan, which began with Jesus’ vision, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven” (Luke 10:17-18). From that time on the church has born witness to the redemptive power of the Lamb. The apostle John wrote, “the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan,” has been bound and kept from “deceiving the nations” (Rev 20:2-3). The power of evil has been curtailed in anticipation of the final judgment. “Now is the time for judgment on this world,” Jesus said; “now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:31-32). The crucified and risen Lord has “disarmed the powers and authorities. . . .triumphing over them by the cross” (Col 2:15).

Living between the Hallelujahs means living in anticipation of the end of evil and the glory of the

⁶ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 411. If we take the militaristic metaphors literally we have “a most impressive picture of a warlike theocracy” (Herman Gunkel, *JSTOR*, 365). Delitzsch writes, “It was by means of this Psalm that Casper Scloppius in his *Classicum Belli Sacri*, which, as Bakius says, is written not with ink, but with blood, inflamed the Roman Catholic princes to the Thirty Years’ religious War. And in the Protestant Church Thomas Munzer stirred up the War of the Peasants by means of this Psalm.”

new heaven and the new earth. We believe, along with the psalmist, that the Lord has already put the principalities and powers of this dark world on notice. The victory of the risen Lord is secure and only remains to be consummated. Until then we wait with praise on our lips and in our hearts and we wield the double-edged sword of the gospel in our hands.