

The rhythm and scope of worship in the Psalms expands our devotional life. Everything is included; no sphere of life, no span of time is excluded. The shape of the psalter intentionally juxtaposes distinct yet inseparable themes. Right from the start we see the psalmist's insistence on a large canvas. Psalm 1 captures life's inscape – the inner nature of the person. Psalm 2 maps the eschatological landscape of space and time. Together these two psalms cover the personal and the political. Hebrew poetic parallelism rhymes ideas, not sounds. Truth in worship is prayed antiphonally, reverberating throughout soul and society. We experience a similar range of meaning in Psalms 8 and 9.

Taken together Psalms 8 and 9 offer a magnificent world-view sweep of creation and history. Psalm 8 is a creation psalm. David marvels at a great paradox. Humans are minuscule when compared to the splendor of creation but when crowned with glory and honor they are just “a little lower than God.” Psalm 9 is a history psalm. David describes the tension between the righteous judge who reigns forever and the arrogance of the nations who forget God. Israel's king ushers us into the presence of God and leads us in song, before delving into the dilemma of history and politics.

*A Worship Pastor*

*I will give thanks to you, Lord, with all my heart;  
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.  
I will be glad and rejoice in you;  
I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High.*  
Psalm 9:1-2

We may be in the habit of feeling our way into worship, instead of worshipping our way into feelings. We may depend upon our feelings to move and inspire us, but feelings are unreliable guides. Feelings are fickle and flighty, easily shaken and shift. This is where the Psalms are especially helpful, because the Psalms are dependable guides, our feelings are not. The Psalms provide the solid ground we need to stand on for worship. So whether we feel like it or not, Psalm 9 leads us in prayer. We are coached in confidence and nurtured in poise—our feelings get in shape.

King David takes the lead in exuberant worship. His determination to praise is emphatic in his personal commitment (“I will”) repeated four times. He is resolute and heartfelt in his praise to the Lord. This joyful call to worship is based on the name of the Lord and corresponds to Psalm 8: “Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps 8:1, 9). Once again the psalmist leads by example, urging us to worship our way into feelings rather than feeling our way into worship. We learn how to enter into worship from his gratitude and gladness, his speaking and his singing. David may be the king, but he is also a pastor, leading the congregation in love, making disciples, witnessing to the truth, guiding emotions, and celebrating the Lord's wonderful deeds.

## *Divine Intervention*

*My enemies turn back;  
they stumble and perish before you.  
For you have upheld my right and my cause,  
sitting enthroned as the righteous judge.  
You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked;  
you have blotted out their name for ever and ever.  
Endless ruin has overtaken my enemies,  
you have uprooted their cities; even the memory of them is perished.*

Psalm 9:3-6

Whether the psalmist is describing victory over the Philistines or whether today's believer is contemplating the Lord's eschatological vindication, the psalm underscores the need for divine intervention. The prophetic perfects used in these verses frame the judgment of God from the divine perspective. In the everlasting present of God's timekeeping every promise is fulfilled. All God's work is a finished work. At every point along the salvation history time line it is the Lord who upholds, judges, rebukes, destroys, blots out and uproots. "The divine decree of judgment stops the wicked in their tracks."<sup>1</sup> It is the Lord who rules in righteousness and remembers the needy: "For you have upheld my right and my cause" (Ps 9:4). Without the sovereign Lord securing our salvation we have no hope. We cannot save ourselves. Worship reminds us that the one in whom we trust is sovereign over the nations. Nations come and go, rise and fall, at his command. The Lord alone has the power to administer "endless ruin" and wipe away even the memory of cities and civilizations.

## *The Name*

*The Lord reigns forever;  
he has established his throne for judgment.  
He rules the world in righteousness  
and judges the peoples with equity.  
The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed,  
a stronghold in times of trouble.  
Those who know your name trust in you,  
for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.  
Sing the praises of the Lord, enthroned in Zion;  
proclaim among the nations what he has done.  
For he who avenges blood remembers;  
he does not ignore the cries of the afflicted.*

Psalm 9:7-12

"Psalm 9 is dominated by the image of the divine throne. . . . The judgment throne of God is the real and final arbiter before which all events in this world, especially the great moral and spiritual

---

<sup>1</sup> Ross, *The Psalms*, vol.1:307.

conflicts of man's history, are summoned with a view to final assessment."<sup>2</sup> The Lord's reign is enduring (9:7), righteous (9:8), just (9:8), and trustworthy (9:10). The Lord's throne defends the oppressed and protects the weak (9:9). "Sing," the psalmist commands. "Sing the praises of the Lord, enthroned in Zion" (9:11). Every time the national anthem is sung we are reminded that our primary allegiance and citizenship is to Jesus Christ, King of kings and Lord of lords. The Church sings psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in her heart to the Lord (Col 3:16). We sing today in anticipation of heaven's worship. The apostle John anticipated powerful singing in the presence of God: Hymns of adoration, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come;" Songs of redemption, "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation..." Anthems of glory, sung with energy and enthusiasm, "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" (Rev 4:8; 5:9, 12).

The apostles echo Psalm 9 in their preaching. In a way never before imagined by the people of God, Jesus Christ of Nazareth is the name to be celebrated and praised – the name that is above every name. Jesus is God incarnate, the exact representation of God's being, and the one and only name that can be trusted. Peter, "filled with the Holy Spirit" announced courageously, "Rulers and elders of the people! . . . Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which you must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The apostle Paul declared that Jesus' bodily resurrection confirmed the coming judgment: "For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). The gospel invitation is grandly inclusive of all people, "proclaim among the nations what he has done." The Psalms and the apostles agree: only this name, and no other, is trustworthy. Only this name, and no other, deserves to be proclaimed among the nations. Only this name, and no other, counters the ideological and idolatrous pull of the nations. King David was subject to the Lord, the righteous judge (9:4), who reigns forever from his established throne of judgment (9:7). We may be citizens in a democratic republic but like David we are subject to the same sovereign Lord. Ultimately, the definition of government makes very little difference. Only this name, and no other, avenges blood and holds people accountable. "He does not ignore the crises of he afflicted" (Ps 9:12; see 10:13).

One of the big reasons David worships the Lord is because "the sovereign judge has not forgotten the cry of the afflicted."<sup>3</sup> The Lord remembers the oppressed by holding the perpetrators of injustice accountable. He requires blood. He demands "punishment for bloodthirsty oppressors (Ezek 33:6, 8; Gen 9:5).<sup>4</sup> To argue that the judgment of God is obsolete is to argue against the teaching of the Bible, the nature of God, and even the moral sensibilities of what it means to be human.

Yale theologian Miroslav Volf asks us to imagine giving a lecture in a war zone to people "whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground,

---

<sup>2</sup> Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Ross, *The Psalms*, vol 1:309.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 309.

whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit.” The subject is “a Christian attitude toward violence” and the thesis is that “the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance.” Volf, himself a Croatian who lived and taught in Croatia during the war in former Yugoslavia, argues that non-retaliation and the possibility of reconciliation is grounded in the reality of God’s judgment. If there is no divine accountability for sin and evil, it is impossible to live out the gospel of Christ. To deny the wrath of God often means that one has not experienced the horrors of war and the tragedy of evil.<sup>5</sup>

Jerry Sittser suffered the devastating loss of his wife, daughter and mother in a terrible car crash caused by a drunk driver. In *A Grace Disguised*, he describes his experience of God’s grace in the midst of staggering loss. One part of Jerry’s story relates to the psalmist’s encouragement to trust in the righteous and just judgment of the Lord. Jerry writes:

*Eight months after the accident the alleged driver of the other car was tried in federal court on four counts of vehicular manslaughter. I was issued a subpoena to be a witness for the prosecution, which meant that once again I had to face the man whom I had met on the road shortly after the accident. I dreaded this trip to Boise, where the trial was held. I was so nervous I actually got sick. I did not want revenge, but I did want justice so that the man whom I considered responsible for the deaths of four people would pay the just penalty for his wrongdoing. At least then there would be some vindication for the suffering he had caused.*

*The prosecution was confident of victory. The case seemed so obvious. But the defense attorney argued that no one could actually prove that the accused had been driving the car, since both he and his wife had been thrown from the vehicle. So the burden of proof was put on the prosecution. A witness saw the accused get into the driver’s seat only ten minutes before the accident occurred. Other witnesses heard the accused admit after the accident that had been the driver of the car. But the defense attorney was able to cast enough suspicion on the testimony of the witnesses to gain an acquittal for his client.*

*I was enraged after the trial, which in mind turned out to be as unjust as the accident itself. The driver did not get what he deserved any more than the victims, whether living or dead, had gotten what they deserved. The travesty of the trial became a symbol for the unfairness of the accident itself. I had to work hard to fight off the cynicism. . . .*

*I think that I was spared excessive preoccupation with revenge because I believe God is just, even though the judicial system is not. Ultimately every human being will have to stand before God, and God will judge every person with wisdom and impartiality. Human systems may fail; God’s justice does not. I also believe that God is merciful, in ways that far exceed what we could imagine or muster ourselves. It is the tension between God’s justice and mercy that makes God so capable of dealing with wrongdoers. God is able to punish people without*

---

<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 304.

*destroying them, and to forgive people without indulging them.*<sup>6</sup>

The promise of Psalm 9 is that the Lord remembers and acts according to his just judgment, “and every act of deliverance is a preview of the final deliverance to come, which is cause for greater praise.”<sup>7</sup> Oppressed believers will find comfort in the international scope of this promise: “proclaim among the nations what he has done” (9:11). Those who are living under the threat of tyrannical governments and terrorists will identify with the psalmist’s perspective and deepen their resolve to remain faithful in spite of persecution and oppression. But it is not only believers who are on the front lines of religious and political persecution that can appreciate and pray this psalm. All believers struggle with feelings of revenge and unforgiveness and the only way forward is for us to turn to the Lord who is our refuge and avenger. We can afford to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us when we have determined by God’s grace to put our lives in the hands of the holy, just and merciful God, who alone is enthroned in Zion.

### *The Nations*

*Lord, see how my enemies persecute me!  
Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death,  
that I may declare your praises in the gates of Daughter Zion,  
and there rejoice in your salvation.  
The nations have fallen into the pit they have dug;  
their feet are caught in the net they have hidden.  
The Lord is known by his acts of justice;  
the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands.  
The wicked go down to the realm of the dead,  
all the nations that forget God.  
But God will never forget the needy;  
the hope of the afflicted will never perish.  
Arise, Lord, do not let mortals triumph;  
let the nations be judged by your presence.  
Strike them with terror, Lord;  
let the nations know they are only mortal.*

Psalm 9:13-20

The people of God are the *needy* and they stand in opposition to “all the nations that forget God.” These nations are described as wicked and self-destructive. They have fallen into the pit they have dug. They are ensnared by the trap they have set. They are indifferent to the plight of the needy and afflicted. The psalmist turns to the Lord for mercy and preservation. “Lift me up from the gates of death,” he cries, so that “I may declare your praises in the gates of Daughter of Zion, and there rejoice in your salvation.” The contrasting “gates” cause the Christian to remember Jesus’ description of the narrow and wide gates: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the

---

<sup>6</sup> Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 111, 127. *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss* is a wonderful book that I wish every Christian would read. Sittser translates his experience into grace-filled spiritual direction for all believers.

<sup>7</sup> Ross, *The Psalms*, vol 1:310.

gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matt 7:13-14).

Christians know that no nation can administer justice and rule the world in righteousness. No ruler can destroy the enemy, deliver the oppressed, and attend to the cry of the afflicted. No matter how much we might wish it otherwise, human capability and culpability render the worthy quest for social justice impossible. Politics cannot achieve the righteousness longed for by the image-bearers of God any more than medicine can achieve everlasting life. There is a clash of kingdoms between the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. The nations of the world are set in opposition to the Name that is above every name.

Our national identity is unique. Jesus said to Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). Our earthly sojourn is inspired by our citizenship in heaven: “For our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:20).

French philosopher and Christian theologian Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) lamented that the West suffered from a political illusion. People assume that there is a political solution for everything and that freedom and justice can be obtained by politics. Instead of experiencing real freedom, Ellul argued, people are duped into giving themselves passionately to politics. “We talk endlessly of politics,” he wrote, “in an unconscious effort to hide the void in our actual situation.”<sup>8</sup> Political action is a subterfuge diverting attention from the real source of freedom and justice. The French sociologist claimed that our first priority must be “to demythologize politics and put it into its proper, limited place.”<sup>9</sup> He rejected that the notion that political action and engagement were capable of fundamentally changing the individual and society for the better.

Ellul saw politics as important, but only in a limited way. He wrote, “My aim is not to invite people to cease being interested in political affairs or to disregard them.” But we have to give up the notion that we can control society through political action. “The hope must be surrendered that constitutional rules, good institutions, or socio-economic changes will modify anything in a decisive fashion. The hope must be abandoned that the citizen will be able to control the state. Politics is a problem of life, and of life without respite. . . .Justice cannot be had in politics.”<sup>10</sup>

Ellul reasoned that in a democracy we have to admit “the relatively limited scope of all political debate. To admit this relativity will prevent people from becoming agitated to the point of delirium. . . .”<sup>11</sup> He wrote, “It is necessary to help the citizens’ political feelings, reactions, and thoughts become less dramatic.”<sup>12</sup> Ellul argued that the media in a competitive consumer

---

<sup>8</sup> Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 202-203.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

environment fosters “the arbitrary and illusory world of superficial political judgments and superficial emotional reactions.”<sup>13</sup> The citizen becomes “the plaything of orthodoxies” and “an easy prey for propaganda.”<sup>14</sup> A sure sign of misplaced hope is when believers respond to a political election by throwing up their hands and saying, “This is the end! There’s no hope!”

Many believers are unnecessarily agitated and traumatized, some to the point of “delirium,” over social hostility. But the culture remains as it has been since the time of Christ, systemically and fundamentally antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ. An inflated understanding of political power and control has spawned a web of related illusions that confuse and agitate well-meaning believers.

We need the perspective of the psalmist, whose political philosophy is born out in his worship. “I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High” (9:2). King David acknowledged that whatever power he wielded against evil and for righteousness belonged to the Lord. He was neither a puppet in a scripted play nor a pawn in a political chess match. He was instead a loyal subject, an obedient worshiper, and a humble servant of the one enthroned in Zion. We may need to ask ourselves if our political philosophy is born out in our worship.

Psalm 8 celebrates the inherent sanctity and significance of humanity now lost in the impersonal collectives of unbelief and injustice described in Psalm 9. The nations (Ps 9:5, 11, 15, 19, 20) stand opposed to the righteous judge who sits enthroned in Zion. Their proud cities deserve to be uprooted, because they have ignored the cries of the afflicted. Their triumphant destiny is spoiled by their own self-serving plots and strategies. They cannot escape their self-destructive ways. The nations have forgotten God and despised God’s image-bearers. The cosmic scope of Psalm 8 is set in contrast with the psalmist’s on-the-ground reporting of human history. Psalm 2 is revisited: “Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?”

The meaning of the person is corrupted in the aggregate. Mass man will always be a dehumanized version of God’s image-bearing designation. Political man is stripped of glory and honor by virtue of his ideological commitments whether it be to democratic self-government or dictatorial tyrannical rule. David gathers up the world’s unbelief and injustice into an impersonal collective and calls it “the nations.”

Jesus did something similar in his highly priestly prayer in John 17 when he labeled unbelief as the world. “I pray for them [his disciples]. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. . . . I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world.” (John 17:9, 14-18). David’s “the nations” and Jesus’ “the world” describe the same collective identity. It is a society that sees the will and rule of God as bondage – a society that says to itself, “Let us break their chains and throw off their shackles” (Ps 2:3). It

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 204.

is a society that hates Christ's followers because they live by the word of God.

C. S. Lewis may have had Psalm 9 in mind when he contrasted the human person as image-bearer of God with "nations, cultures, arts, and civilizations." These impersonal collective descriptions of mass man hold no comparison to the person made in the image of God. Lewis writes, "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendors."<sup>15</sup> King David prays, "let the nations know they are only mortal."

Unbelief and injustice is gathered up into an impersonal collective; David used "the nations" and Jesus used "the world." Neither David nor Jesus hold out hope for changing the nations or saving the world. The nations are what they are and the world remains the world. But there is hope that people from every nation, tribe, people group and language will "stand before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev 7:9). There is hope that people in the world, people for whom Christ died, "will cease to be the world and will join those of whom Jesus says for they are yours."<sup>16</sup> This is why the apostle Paul wrote, "So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view" (2 Cor 5:16).

---

<sup>15</sup> Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*, Collier, 1965, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Carson, *John*, 561.