

We picture these enthronement psalms (Pss 93-100) leading the people of God in celebration of the Lord's reign. They may have had their liturgical origin at the fall Feast of the Tabernacles, but they work just as well today when Christians gather to worship the triune God and celebrate the rule and reign of Jesus Christ. Psalm 96 draws on other psalms (Ps 29, 93) and is echoed in the Book of Isaiah (Ps 96:11 – Isa 44:23; 49:13; Ps 96:12 – Isa 43:23; 55:12; Ps 96:13 – Isa 40:10, 50:19,20, 60:1; 62:11).¹ While it may be debated who came first, the psalmist or the prophet, what is certain is the resounding call to worship. Through the centuries the people of God have been called to sing to the Lord a new song and to ascribe to the Lord glory due his name (Ps 96:1, 8). The global reach of this call to worship is anticipated in Psalm 96, so we should not be surprised that believers all around the world use this psalm to worship the Lord “in the splendor of his holiness” (Ps 96:9).

The historical background and inspiration for this “new song” may have been when King David brought the ark of God into Jerusalem (1 Chron 16:23-33; 2 Sam 6:12-19). As the processional approached the City of David those who carried the ark of the Covenant stopped every six steps to make sacrifices. We are told that all of Israel was in on the special occasion. The people were shouting praise, musicians were blaring trumpets, and David, dressed like a servant, wearing only a linen ephod, danced with all his might. The king threw caution to the wind and abandoned any sense of royal decorum as he leaped and danced before the Lord. The occasion was marked by great joy and generosity as the people celebrated the testimony of the Lord's covenant promises.

The narrative behind the liturgy of Psalm 96 highlights several significant truths about worship. David's dancing before the Lord with all his might delivered a never-to-be-forgotten witness to the glory and majesty of Israel's covenant-keeping God, Yahweh. Consider the difference between David *lecturing* about the greatness of God and David abandoning all decorum and protocol and leaping and dancing before the Lord. All of Israel, from the lowest servants to the ranking members of his royal cabinet, witnessed in this processional the visible, visceral truth of God. Smoke and the scent of sacrifices filled the air. The king humbled himself like a servant. He took off his royal robes and put on a servant's tunic and danced with all his might! In that total sensory experience of sight, sound, smell, and touch David embodied the message. He might have said, “Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness” (Ps 96:9), but that day he proved it by his actions. Physicality and spirituality merged in a dramatic incarnate expression of lived truth. In reading between the lines of this story we begin to understand the adrenaline pumping passion of the psalmist.

Ironically, Uzzah's shocking death may have played a part in provoking David's passion. The seemingly innocuous efficiency of an ox drawn cart and Uzzah's innocent reaching out and taking hold of the ark of God when the oxen stumbled proved deadly and disastrous. “David was afraid of the Lord that day” and the whole “we-can-manage-this” processional ended right there on the spot (2 Sam 6:9). Three months later when the processional resumed nothing was taken for granted, every step forward was celebrated by king, priests, people, and musicians in a

¹Ross, Psalms, 133.

choreographed liturgy of praise. Uzzah's death humbled David, filled him with the fear of the Lord, and undoubtedly led to David's passionate and sacrificial worship.

Added to this experience, was the exchange between David and his wife Michal. She was embarrassed by her husband's emotional display. It is safe to say she understood nothing of David's embodied worship and devotion of Yahweh. All she felt was shame and disdain. Her anger and sarcasm can be heard in her rebuke, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!" David's response was spoken like a king, like an unashamed passionate worshiper. He declared, "I will celebrate before the Lord," adding, "I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes. But by these slave girls you spoke of, I will be held in honor" (2 Sam 6:20-22).

Sing!

*Sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
Sing to the Lord, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvelous deeds among all peoples.
For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;
he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and glory are in his sanctuary.*

Psalm 96:1-6

Six imperatives launch this all-out call to worship: Sing! Sing! Sing! Praise! Proclaim! Declare! Every imperative is a call to action. Every one a vocal, vibrant, joyful exclamation, emphatically responding to who the Lord is and what he has done. Not all the psalms are like this, but this one is. "Nothing listless or introverted, nothing stale, befits the praise of God."² In the Spirit, the psalmist calls all believers to submit their traditions, habits, and liturgies to this flat-out, no-holds-bared, exuberant worship. Four imperatives focus worship Godward, followed by two imperatives, "proclaim" and "declare," that propel the message outward. In the Greek version (LXX), the verb to proclaim gives us the word "evangelize." Derek Kidner writes, "There may be a lesson hidden in this sequence (first upwards to God, then outwards to man): a corrective to static worship and shallow preaching alike."³ The outreach of this evangelistic worship is global. We have a story to tell to the nations. Every tribe, language, people, and nation deserve to hear the gospel, because that is what it means to "declare his glory among the nations, and his marvelous deeds among all peoples" (Ps 96:3).

² Kidner, Psalms, 347.

³ Kidner, Psalms, 347.

The psalmist gives four reasons for evangelistic worship: the Lord is worthy of all praise; the Lord is greater than all gods, angels, celebrities, and leaders; for all these substitute “gods” are really no “gods” at all, just idols; and since the Lord “made the heavens,” “honor,” “majesty,” “strength,” and “beauty” belong to him.⁴ Everything is encompassed under his sovereignty. The Lord is no tribal deity, sponsoring an ethnic religion. The Lord reigns over all. For these reasons worship and evangelism form a dynamic tension, each serving as an energizing and motivating catalyst for the other. Evangelism produces a powerful incentive to worship because both mission and worship are centered in God. Worship reminds us that “mission is not ours; mission is God’s.” We worship the triune God who is on a mission and when we worship we are reminded, “it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church; the church was made for mission—God’s mission.”⁵

The psalmist shares a vision of the Lord of glory in his sanctuary that transcends the gods – the gods we make into idols, the celebrities we treat like gods, and the rich and powerful we envy and idolize. The psalmist leads us in worship, “Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.” The psalmist envisioned the Tabernacle and the Temple as the testimony to God’s glory. Today, believers know that the glory of God was more fully revealed in Jesus: “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory the glory of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Ascribe!

*Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations,
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 the splendor of his holiness;
tremble before him, all the earth.
Say among the nations, “The Lord reigns.”
The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;
he will judge the peoples with equity.*

Psalm 96:7-10

The implication in the second section is that the worship inspired mission described in the first six verses has been successful. The inclusive gospel invites all the families of the nations to give exclusive devotion to the Lord the glory. The three-fold opening imperative to “Sing!” is matched by a three-fold exhortation to ascribe [give] to the Lord the glory due his name. This call to worship also appears in Psalm 29, but instead of the call going out to “all you families of nations,” it summons “heavenly beings” or “mighty ones” to give God glory. In both Psalm 96 and Psalm 29 the psalmist expands our vision of worship. The people of God are joined by the

⁴ Ross, Psalms, 138-139

⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2006), 62.

angels and the nations in giving God the glory due his name. The Lord is arrayed in the beauty of holiness and worthy of all praise. To respond to this call to worship is to “tremble before him” at the immense scope of the Lord’s reign and the largeness of his salvation.

Christians do well to unite the psalmist’s powerful vision of worship with the apostle Paul’s opening doxology in his letter to the church at Ephesus (Eph 1:3-14). Paul leads believers in what it means to “ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.” Everything good and right and true in our lives is wrapped up in praise to the triune God. Like the psalmist, the language Paul uses to praise God is exuberant and exalted. His praying imagination is focused on the Trinitarian pattern in creation and redemption — God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit at work creating, saving, and binding everything together by God’s grace and for his glory. His scope is cosmic. There is nothing small or individualistic about this call to worship. The apostle and psalmist alike call us out of our small-mindedness into the most real world of God’s glory. The specificity and expanse of the apostle’s doxology fills out the meaning of the psalmist’s invitation to worship – “to the praise of his glory” (Eph 1:14). We may struggle with the largeness of their vision for worship, because we are so easily tempted to reduce everything down to the small world of self-realization and self-discovery. But as David Wells reminds us, “The self is a canvas too narrow, too cramped, to contain the largeness of Christian truth.”⁶ The summons to bestow on Yahweh the honor due his name, to bow low to Yahweh in his holy majesty, and to ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name, reorients our motives and feelings.

The fervor of the psalmist’s call to worship is eschatological in scope and corresponds to Jesus’ Sermon on the End of the World, when he unfurled an all encompassing picture of the end. Jesus warned that “nation will arise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom” (Matthew 24:7). He promised, “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all the nations, and then the end will come” (Matthew 24:14). And angels will “gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other” (Matthew 24:31). Psalm 96 points forward to the risen Lord Jesus Christ and his Great Commission, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Psalm 96 should be prayed in anticipation of the healing of the nations around the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev 22:2).

Evangelistic worship proclaims to the nations, “The Lord reigns!” The natural world of quantum physics and the moral world of justice and righteousness are completely under God’s sovereign care and ultimate judgment. “Against the welter of raging nations and collapsing regimes,” the psalmist concludes with “a new and overwhelming assertion of sovereignty. . . . The disastrous freedom of the Fall will be replaced by the only ‘perfect freedom,’ which is serving God.”⁷

Rejoice!

*Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.*

⁶ David F. Wells, *No Place For Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 183.

⁷ Kidner, *Psalms*, 348-349.

*Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
Let all creation rejoice before the Lord, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.*
Psalm 96:11-13

Psalm 96 concludes with a thrilling panorama of all creation breaking into jubilant praise. He envisions the heavens rejoicing and the earth filled with gladness. Fields and forests are personified instruments of adoration. They sing the praises of God. In *The Lord of the Rings* J. R. R. Tolkien imagines trees obeying the will of their Maker. Trees are sensitive to the presence of evil and righteousness. The trees play an active role in protecting and defending the cause of righteousness. The psalmist's praying imagination agrees. It is as if all of creation is waiting on the edge of its seat, ready to celebrate, poised to sing "Hallelujah!" It is true "the whole creation has been groaning" but it is also true that "the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed." For when the Lord comes to judge the earth, creation "will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and the glory of the children of God" (Rom 8:18-22).

The invitation to worship, "Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord" (Ps 95:1), meets its ultimate climax and fulfillment in the coming of the Lord, when "he comes to judge the earth" in righteousness and "the peoples in his faithfulness" (Ps 96:13). These two comings, our coming to Lord in expectation and the Lord's coming to us and to all of creation in consummation, form the nexus for exuberant, embodied worship. We worship today in anticipation "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:10-11).