

Evangelistic worship proclaims to the nations, “The Lord reigns,” and celebrates the universal rule of God’s justice and righteousness (Ps 96:10). In this sequence of enthronement psalms, Psalm 97 picks up where Psalm 96 leaves off. The psalmist concludes, “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” (Ps 96:13). The purpose of Psalm 97 is to explore the reality of the Lord’s coming, to understand the impact of his coming on worshipers and idolaters, and to work out the “already and not yet” experience of the Lord’s coming.

Yahweh reigns is a dynamic, universal truth that envelops the whole earth in “the splendor of his holiness” (Ps 96:9). His righteousness and justice are foundational to his rule. His powerful presence is felt from the villages of Judah to distant shores. Even the earth is glad and the upright in heart are filled with joy because the Most High rules over all the earth. The grander and glory of the living God is evident to all, even to the atheist, the idolater, the wicked, and the indifferent. “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Rom 1:20).

The Heavens Proclaim

*The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad;
let the distant shores rejoice.
Clouds and thick darkness surround him;
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
Fire goes before him
and consumes his foes on every side.
His lightning lights up the world;
the earth sees and trembles.
The mountains melt like wax before the Lord,
before the Lord of all the earth.
The heavens proclaim his righteousness,
and all the peoples see his glory.*

Psalm 97:1-6

Psalm 97 gives worshipers a full sensory experience of the coming of the Lord that appeals to our whole being. We are meant to feel the pulsating atmosphere of the psalm as much as we are meant to understand the truths of the psalm. To break down the poetics of the psalm into indicative statements of fact is to strip the psalm of its energy and emotion. The psalmist orchestrates the message so that we feel the presence of the Lord. The coming of the Lord rolls in like the thick dark clouds of a thunderstorm. His judgment is like fire consuming everything in his path. His revealing light is like flashes of lightning across the sky. The psalmist intentionally uses metaphor to enhance the primacy of perception. The coming of the Lord is escorted into our consciousness by the unleashed forces of nature. The poet psalmist knows that truth is not

pedantic and boring. It is vital, vibrant, and visceral. We feel it in our gut so we can feel it in our heart, so we can think in our mind, so we can act on it in our lives. This is why the “knowing” that accompanies worship takes in everything: music, science, aesthetics, sociology, and theology.

The psalmist begins with a geographic sweep of liturgical praise. “Let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice.” The Bible runs with the metaphor. If the earth is glad then the trees are clapping, the mountains and hills are singing, and the rocks are crying out in praise (Isa 55:12; Luke 19:40). Worshipers are liturgical environmentalists, not standing apart, but within creation to praise God. They are learning the language of praise from botany and biology. Along with astrophysicists they are dancing with the stars and exploring the depths with oceanographers.

Natural phenomenon mark the coming of the Lord. Ten plagues of nature preceded the Exodus and at Mount Sinai the Lord came “in a dense cloud,” accompanied by “thunder and lightning,” and the mountain shook violently (Exod 19:9,16,18). Christ’s coming was confirmed by “signs, wonders and various miracles” (Heb 2:4). In the Book of Revelation a fourfold repetition of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning and an earthquake stand for the final and universal end of God’s judgment (Rev 4:5; 8:5; 11:19; 16:18). The first section of Psalm 97 makes a case for nature’s confirmation of the gospel. “The heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all peoples see his glory” (Ps 97:6). This very public testimony of the Lord’s reign is not hidden in some secret enclave but published throughout the cosmos. This personal truth, is not a private religious truth, but a public truth confirmed in creation and celebrated in community. We are neither bodiless souls nor soulless bodies but bodies and souls in community (Stott).

The power of the testimony in nature without and within the self (Rom 2:15) means that “the ‘I’ that perceives is always already a ‘we.’”¹ The worshiper is not alone and has nothing to conger up or make something of. The pressure is off because the testimony is already in the public domain. Instead of mounting a defense and making an argument, believers are called testify to what is already on full display. We are like the shepherds who heard the heavenly host sing, “Glory to God in the highest heaven” (Luke 2:14). We cannot help but “go tell it on the mountain.” We are compelled to glorify and praise God for all the things we have heard and seen.

Sacred Games

All who worship images are put to shame,
those who boast in idols –
worship him, all ye gods!

Psalm 97:7

The seemingly intrusive and glaring reference to idolaters at the center of the psalm cannot be ignored. Not everyone is convinced that the Lord reigns. Nature’s phenomenal witness is brushed off by some. What the earth perceives with jubilant joy is rejected by the idolater with a shrug.

¹James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. Baker, 2013, 84.

Instead of being awed by righteousness and justice, the idolater is awed by his images of success. He prides himself on his own gods. He is unimpressed by the consuming fire of God's judgment and unmoved by the lightning strikes of God's truth. The psalmist wastes no time on the subject of idolatry. Idolaters are dismissed with a sentence. He simply says they will be put to shame. But we may need to pause here and reflect on what the psalmist is saying.

Nietzsche followed-up his famous "God is dead" declaration with a question, "How shall we comfort ourselves What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent?"² Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Kelly, two top tier philosophers from Berkeley and Harvard, claim that living in the secular age means admitting that there are no deep and hidden truths to the universe, much less revealed truths. But that does not mean people have to live in despair, because sports offers a new form of transcendence. For Dreyfus and Kelly, "Sports may be the place in contemporary life where Americans find sacred community most easily."³

On the surface spectator sports should be just an innocent pastime, a fun escape to distract us from life's routine. But if we drill down a little deeper we'll probably realize that sports is having a huge impact on how we think and live. The synapses of a brain trained to the quick visual stimulus of an NFL helmet-to-helmet hit, replayed four or five times, can hardly cope with hearing the human voice preach the Word of God. The sensual atmosphere of heart-throbbing international soccer is hardly a level playing field for singing worship songs. True worship is bound to be a challenge for sport junkies hooked on the game's adrenaline rush. Can we watch the second-to-second high impact visual impressions of the NFL or NBA and learn to pray the Psalms?⁴

In the modern pantheon of American deities sports ranks alongside money, sex, and power. Sports serves as an antidote to secular despair. There is a spiritual power to sports that possesses, enralls, and captivates the American consumer. How does the visceral experience of a ball game match up with the invisible realities grounding holy worship in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit? How can the truth of our fallen human condition and God's redemptive provision compete with the throbbing excitement of a tie game in the bottom of the ninth, one man on, and the team's best hitter at the plate? Can the Bread and Cup compete with ballpark hot dogs? "The sports god is an enticing deity; he offers splendid moments of transcendence while never demanding that we take up our cross, forgive our enemies, or serve the poor."⁵

Most commentators skip over the reference to idolatry (Ps 97:7a-b) and dwell on the phrase, "worship him, all you gods!" (Ps 97:7c). The debate centers on whether this is a reference to "false gods" or "rulers of the people" or "angels." The psalmist is either commanding "false gods" to submit to the one true and living God or he is commanding angels to worship the Lord

² Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Gay Science*, section 125, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Translated and Edited by Walter Kaufmann. New York: The Modern Library, 2000.

³ Dreyfus & Kelly, *All Things Shining*, 192.

⁴ Webster, Intensity Without Ultimacy: A Christian Perspective on Sports, March 21, 2016. <https://theotherjournal.com/2016/03/21/intensity-without-ultimacy-christian-perspective-sports/>

⁵ Mark Galli, *The Prodigal Sports Fan*, Christianity Today, April 8, 2005, 49.

(see Heb 1:6; Deut 32:43 LXX). Ross concludes that “false gods” is the better interpretation: “Thus, even the gods that idolaters worship are inferior to God – so they are called on to submit to the Lord. The focus certainly refers to the spirit forces behind false gods.”⁶

Zion Rejoices

*Zion hears and rejoices
and the villages of Judah are glad
because of your judgments, Lord.
For you, Lord, are the Most High over all the earth;
you are exalted far above all gods.
Let those who love the Lord hate evil,
for he guards the lives of his faithful ones
and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.
Light shines on the righteous
and joy on the upright in heart.
Rejoice in the Lord, you who are righteous,
and praise his holy name.*

Psalm 97:8-12

Psalm 97 does not ignore evil, but neither does it dwell on it. Evil is dealt with in justice. The fire of God’s judgment consumes “his foes on every side” (Ps 97:3) and idolaters “are put to shame” (Ps 97:7a). Those “who love the Lord hate evil” and are delivered “from the hand of the wicked” (Ps 97:10). Yet, the dominate emphasis in the psalm is on rejoicing. Joy is the theme that runs through the psalm. The earth is glad. The distant shores rejoice. Zion hears and rejoices. The villages of Judah are glad. The upright in heart are filled with joy and the righteous rejoice in the Lord. The psalm ends on a note of praise: “Rejoice in the Lord, you who are righteous, and praise his holy name” (Ps 97:12).

The psalmist sums up what accounts for this joy in three fundamental attributes of the Lord’s character. Joy is rooted in the Lord’s judgments – “righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne” (Ps 97:2, 8). Joy is based on the Lord’s authority – “For you, Lord, are the Most High over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods” (Ps 97:9). Joy is secured by the Lord’s faithfulness – “For he guards the loves of his faithful ones and delivers them from the hand of the wicked” (Ps 97:10).

Wisdom distinguishes between the joy of the Lord and the happiness of the world. Several lines in the closing section of the psalm draw this distinction out and remind the believer in practical terms what it means to declare, “Yahweh reigns.” We need to let three truths sink into the essence of who we are. These gut level convictions cover the Christian life from worship to mission and from justification to sanctification and from devotion to ethics. It is not enough to think about them conceptually or believe in them doctrinally. We love and embrace them fully. Simply stated:

⁶ Ross, Psalms, 156; see Boice, Psalms, vol.2, 792; Kidner, 350.

(1) *The Lord is exalted far above all gods.* The Lord's command, "to have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3), sets the people of God free from bondage. For "no one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). We are compelled by God's grace to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" (Matthew 6:33). This exclusive truth claim (John 14:6) is not our burden, but our blessing. For there is only "one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:5-6).

(2) *To love the Lord is to hate evil.* Amos wrote, "Seek good, not evil, that you may live. . . .Hate evil, love good" (Amos 5:14.15), and the apostle Paul wrote, "Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good" (Rom 12:9), and again, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness" (2 Tim 2:19).

(3) *The Lord's light dawns on the righteous bringing them joy.* Once we walked in darkness, but now we have seen a great light, "on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned" (Isa 9:2). We embrace this truth: "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you" (Isa 60:1). We look forward to a new heaven and a new earth and to the holy garden-city of God, "for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor to it" (Rev 21:23-24). But until that day we declare with the apostle: "God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:5-7).

*Rejoice, the Lord is King; Your Lord and King adore!
Rejoice, give thanks and sing / And triumph evermore.
Lift up your heart; Lift up your voice! Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!*
Charles Wesley