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WORSHIPING, WITNESSING, WAITING

Psalm 96

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Worshipping, Witnessing, Waiting
Psalm 96

A couple had just moved into a new apartment and they were besieged by salesmen for every kind of product and service. This was back in the days when dairies still made home deliveries. So one busy day a dairyman came to the door. "No," said the woman firmly, "My husband and I don't drink milk."

"Be glad to deliver a quart every morning for cooking."

"That's more than I need," she replied, starting to close the door.

"Well, ma'am, how about some cream? Berries comin' in now, and ..."

"No," she said curtly, "we never use cream."

The dairyman retreated slowly, while the woman congratulated herself on her sales resistance. The truth was that she had already ordered from another dairy, and this seemed to her to be the easiest way out.

The following morning, however, the same dairyman appeared at the door. In one hand he held a bowl of dewy strawberries and in the other a half-pint bottle of cream.

"Lady," he said, as he poured the cream over the berries and handed them to her, "I got to thinkin'—you sure have missed a lot!" The woman changed dairies. (*Reader's Digest* [May, 1982].)

The best salesmen are always those who love their product. They are convinced that you cannot really enjoy life unless you have what they are selling. And while sales and evangelism are not completely analogous, the most effective witnesses are those who are obviously captivated by the greatness of God and His salvation.

When I spoke on Psalm 67 a few months ago, I cited John Piper, who begins *Let the Nations be Glad!* ([Baker Academic], 2nd ed., p. 17) by saying, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Wor-

ship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man." He adds (*ibid.*), "The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God."

He is right that worship is the goal of missions. But it's also true that worship is the basis for missions. If we are not fervent worshipers of God, we have nothing to tell the nations. If we do not exude joy in God and His wonderful salvation, why should lost people be interested in what we have to say? So worship is both the goal of missions and the foundation for missions. If we're not worshipers, we will be lousy witnesses.

Psalm 96 is a call to tell the nations about God's glory and His great salvation. It follows on Psalm 95, which describes the stubborn hard-heartedness of Israel in the wilderness, in spite of God's goodness towards them (C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* [Eerdmans], 4:336). It was the same hardhearted nation that later rejected her Messiah, leading to the gospel going out to the Gentiles (Matt. 21:43; Acts 13:46). So Psalms 95 & 96 form a pair, showing Israel's rejection of the gospel and the subsequent missionary task of proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles.

There is debate about the author and date of this psalm. Probably it was originally written by David as a part of a longer psalm that was used when he brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem. (It appears in 1 Chron. 16:23-33 as part of a longer psalm containing Psalms 105:1-15 and 106:1, 47-48. Psalm 96 also contains many common themes with Isaiah 40-66.) The Septuagint (Greek OT) adds the superscription, "When the house was built after the exile. A song of David." So perhaps a later scribe took the original composition by David and modified it into the version that we have here for the celebration of the second temple.

Psalm 96 describes a growing crescendo of worship. First, God's people are called to sing His praises, not just among themselves, but also to tell of His glory among the nations (96:3). Then the nations are called on to ascribe to the Lord the glory of His name (96:7-8). Finally (96:11-12), the inanimate creation is brought into the swelling chorus. The reason for the praise of all creation is the prophecy that the Lord is coming to judge the world in righteousness (96:13). So there are the three themes: worship, witness,

and waiting expectantly for the day when the Lord comes to right all wrongs. We can sum up the message:

Because the Lord is the only great and glorious God, we should worship Him, witness of Him, and wait expectantly for His coming to judge the world.

There are two “worship and witness” sections (1-6, 7-10) followed by the final “waiting expectantly” section (11-13).

1. Worship and witness (cycle 1): All the earth should worship God and witness of His salvation because He is the only great and glorious God (96:1-6).

Verses 1-3 are a call to worship and witness; verses 4-6 give the reasons why we should worship and witness.

- A. The call to worship and witness: All people should joyfully worship God and witness of His salvation among the nations (96:1-3).

The psalmist repeats his theme, “Sing to the Lord,” three times. The first time, he tells us to sing to the Lord “a new song.” This does not necessarily mean a newly composed song, although that may be included. But it refers to a song that celebrates the mercies of God, which are new every morning (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 347).

The second exhortation to sing to the Lord is directed to “all the earth.” The last part of the psalm will tie back into this by calling all creation to praise the Lord. It shows that the scope of God’s praise is as wide as all the earth, which He has created.

The third call to sing to the Lord is followed by three imperatives (bless, proclaim, tell, 96:2-3): “bless His name; proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day. Tell of His glory among the nations, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples.” To bless God’s name means that we should praise and thank Him for all that He is, or His glorious attributes. “Day to day” shows that the good news of His salvation must go forth continually, until the whole earth has heard.

Lest Israel think (as they were always prone to do) that “all the earth” meant, “all the Jews,” the psalmist specifically states that he means the Gentile nations (96:3): “Tell of His glory among the na-

tions, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples." God's glory and His wonderful deeds here (96:3) are poetic parallels to His salvation (96:2). God's salvation displays His glory and His wonderful deeds. Paul refers to "the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). When God broke into his darkness with the gospel, he says that He (2 Cor. 4:6) "has shone into our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

So the order of the psalm is, first worship God joyfully. Sing, sing, sing! Then, bear witness of His glorious salvation to the nations who have never heard. Since under the Old Testament era the nations were specifically excluded from Israel's worship (remember the wall of partition that kept the Gentiles out of the Jewish section of the temple), this psalm prophetically looks ahead to the New Testament era, when all the families of the earth are blessed through Abraham's seed, Jesus Christ.

B. Why worship and witness: Because the Lord is the only great and glorious God (96:4-6).

Why should we get excited about worshipping God and go to all the trouble of telling the nations about His salvation? "For great is the Lord and greatly to be praised; He is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the Lord made the heavens. Splendor and majesty are before Him, strength and beauty are in His sanctuary" (96:4-6).

The pagan world is marked by their fear of the spirit world. They try to placate their gods by putting out offerings of food and drink. They observe superstitious rituals so as not to offend the gods. But the psalmist here says that the only one we should fear is the Lord, who made the heavens (96:5). When he says (96:5), "For all the gods of the people are idols," the Hebrew word for *idols* is *elilim*. It means nothings or nonentities and is a play on words with the Hebrew word for the true God, *elohim*.

The true God is the creator of the universe, which is so vast that even powerful telescopes, such as the Hubbell, cannot find the edge of it. I was listening recently to the Star Date program on NPR, and they said that the giant star Arcturus, which dwarfs our sun, could have already exploded. But if the explosion happened

500 years ago, we still wouldn't know about it for another 100 years, because the light takes 600 years to get from there to us!

So, don't fear manmade idols, which are nothing. Rather, as Psalm 33:6, 8-9 declares and commands, "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host.... Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him. For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast." Fear the Lord, who alone is great and greatly to be praised!

After this first cycle of worship and witness, the psalmist takes us through a second cycle (96:7-10). First, he calls on the nations to worship God because of His glory and strength and then he again calls on God's people to bear witness to the nations of God's rule.

2. Worship and witness (cycle 2): All the earth should worship God and witness of His salvation because He is the only great and glorious God (96:7-10).

A. The nations should worship God because of His glory and strength (96:7-9).

"Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory of His name; bring an offering and come into His courts. Worship the Lord in holy attire; tremble before Him, all the earth" (96:7-9).

The threefold "ascribe" parallels the threefold "sing" that opened the psalm. *Ascribe* is literally *give*. It does not imply that we can give God something that He is lacking. Rather, the idea is that we are to offer God worship that is commensurate with His infinite majesty and glory. Edward Payson observed (cited by Spurgeon, 4:346),

How immeasurably great then is the debt which our world has contracted, and under the burden of which it now groans! During every day and every hour which has elapsed since the apostasy of man, this debt has been increasing; for every day and every hour all men ought to have given unto Jehovah the glory which is due to his name. But no man has ever done this fully. And a vast proportion of our race have never done it at all. Now the difference between the tribute which men ought to have paid to God and that which they actually have paid

constitutes the debt of which we are speaking. How vast, then how incalculable is it!

Since the cross, when Christ offered the perfect and final sacrifice for our sins, the only sacrifices that we can bring into His courts are praise, thanksgiving, and good deeds (Heb. 13:15-16). To “worship the Lord in holy attire” (96:9) may refer to the holy garments that the priests wore, in which case it means that we should come before God clothed with holy lives. Or, it may mean, “worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness” (Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* [IVP], pp. 125-126). Then it would refer to the fear that Isaiah experienced when he saw the Lord, with the seraphim proclaiming, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory” (Isa. 6:3). This latter meaning would be reinforced with the last line of Psalm 96:9, “Tremble before Him, all the earth.”

In other words, if we got just a glimpse of how great God is in His glory, strength, and holiness, we would quickly join Isaiah on our faces, exclaiming (Isa. 6:5), “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” While Isaiah’s vision of God was probably unique in human history, to the extent that God opens our eyes to see His greatness and majesty, to that same extent we will give to Him the glory that is due to His holy name.

The reason that I read and frequently quote men like John Calvin, John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones is that these men lift God up like few others. Calvin often spoke of God reverently as “The Majesty.” The first time I read his *Institutes*, he had me worshiping God within a few pages. I encourage you to read men like these (the Puritans could be added to the list) who knew God and stood in awe of His splendor and majesty.

And, as Isaiah spontaneously experienced, you cannot get a glorious vision of God without at the same time getting a greater understanding of your own sin and depravity. You immediately sense that God isn’t your good buddy in the sky! He is altogether separate from you. You shrink into nothingness in comparison with Him. What is your strength compared to the One who spoke the heavens into existence? What is your puny existence of a few

short years compared with the One who is eternal? What are your attempts at holy living compared with His infinite purity?

But, as soon as Isaiah lamented his own impurity, the Lord immediately sent an angel to purify him and tell him that his sins were forgiven (Isa. 6:6-7). As Psalm 130:3, 4, 7 declares, "If You, O Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.... O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is lovingkindness, and with Him is abundant redemption." A bigger understanding of God and a deeper view of your own sin leads to a greater experience of His abundant grace, resulting in more worship.

As in the first cycle, worship is followed by witness:

B. God's people should witness to the nations about His sovereign rule (96:10).

"Say among the nations, 'The Lord reigns; indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved; He will judge the peoples with equity.'" Even though at present God permits the nations to rage against His Messiah (Ps. 2:1-3), He still reigns. Verse 10 reminds us of Isaiah 52:7, "How lovely on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who announces peace and brings good news of happiness, who announces salvation, and says to Zion, 'Your God reigns!'" Although at present, Jesus' enemies are not all under His feet (1 Cor. 15:25-28), He is coming again in power and glory, to rule the nations with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:11-16). He came the first time as the humble Savior, to die for our sins. But He will come again to rule and judge.

We do not proclaim the gospel adequately if we only present Jesus as meek and mild, gently knocking on your heart's door, wishing that you would open up to Him. He is the risen, sovereign, righteous King of kings and Lord of lords, who is coming with all the armies of heaven, with His sword coming out of His mouth to strike down the nations. "He treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty" (Rev. 19:15). Sinners can either bow willingly before Him now, or they will bow forcedly when He comes. Don't give lost people the idea that Jesus is a wimpy weakling! He is the sovereign Judge! That leads to the last section:

3. Waiting in hope: All creation will worship God when He comes to judge the world (96:11-13).

The thought of God judging the peoples with equity (96:10) leads the psalmist to call the inanimate creation to break forth in praise (96:11-13): "Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all it contains; let the field exult, and all that is in it. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy before the Lord, for He is coming, for He is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His faithfulness."

These verses remind us of Paul's comments in Romans 8:19-22, that the creation presently groans under the curse, waiting for the day of redemption when it will be restored. The Lord's coming to judge the earth refers to the coming of Messiah, who is God.

Three terms describe this future judgment: equity, righteousness, and faithfulness (96:10, 13). *Equity* means that God's judgment will be fair. No one will be judged unfairly. Everyone who does not receive mercy will receive perfect justice. *Righteousness* refers to God's perfect standard, which is Himself. He has revealed His righteousness in His Word. He will not judge on the curve of human goodness, but according to the absolute standards of His own righteous nature. *Faithfulness* can also be translated as *truth*. It means that He will not be arbitrary or whimsical in His judgment. He will judge each person faithfully and truthfully.

God's righteous judgment will either be a source of great terror or great joy. For those who have not received salvation and forgiveness through the Savior whom God has sent, it will be a day of stark terror. They will cry out to the mountains and to the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev. 6:16). But for those who by faith in the shed blood of that Lamb have been clothed with His righteousness, the day of judgment will be a time of great joy (Rev. 18:20). They will sing (Rev. 19:6b-7), "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to Him...." I cannot urge you strongly enough to make sure that your faith is in the risen Savior, so that you look forward to that great day with joy, not with terror!

Conclusion

To sum up the message of Psalm 96 and apply it to us, three things should be true of us:

- If the glorious God is our Savior, we will be *a worshiping people*.

Our voices will often break forth in singing His praises. Our thoughts will often be on how great and mighty God is. Our hearts will often bow in reverence before His holiness. We will look forward with delight to each Lord's Day when we can join with the saints in singing His praises. To give God the glory of His name you must be growing through His Word to know how great He really is.

- If the glorious God is our Savior, we will be *a witnessing people*, both here and abroad.

Witness is the overflow of worship. If you are captivated by a beautiful mountain scene, you can't help but tell others about it. If you are captivated by the majesty and splendor of the glorious God, you'll want to tell others about Him. And, as long as there are peoples around the world with no witness of the Savior, you will want to give generously to support missionaries to go and tell them. You may even sense the Lord calling you to go.

- If the glorious God is our Savior, we will be *a watchful people* as we wait for Christ's coming to judge the world in righteousness.

Jesus warned us of the danger of getting distracted with all of the activities and cares of this world and forgetting that He is coming. While there are many details of Bible prophecy that are difficult to understand, you can't miss the Lord's bottom line (Mark 13:35-37): "Therefore, be on the alert—for you do not know when the master of the house is coming, whether in the evening, at midnight, or when the rooster crows, or in the morning—in case he should come suddenly and find you asleep. What I say to you I say to all, 'Be on the alert!'"

Test yourself by this psalm: Are you *worshiping* the glorious God? Are you *witnessing* to the nations? Are you *watching* expectantly for the Lord to come in judgment?

Application Questions

1. How is evangelism similar to sales? How is it different? What can we learn from these differences?
2. Why must worship be the basis for witness? What are the implications of this?
3. Since getting a deeper view of God's greatness is foundational for worship, how can we grow in this understanding?
4. Does the future judgment bring you fear or hope? Should Christians have any anxiety about the judgment?

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