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## THE LORD REIGNS

Psalm 97

By

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## The Lord Reigns Psalm 97

At first glance, Psalm 97:1 seems easy enough: "The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice." We read it and move on without much thought. But a moment's thought raises all sorts of difficulties.

Does the Lord reign over terrorists who blow up innocent victims? Does He reign over the atrocities of war? Does He reign over floods, earthquakes, tornadoes, and other natural disasters that claim thousands of lives each year? Does the Lord reign over famine, starvation, and deadly diseases? Does the Lord reign over the loss of jobs and homes due to a bad economy? Does He reign over the prolonged disease or untimely death of a loved one? Does He reign over the tensions in your marriage or the struggle and heartache of dealing with a rebellious child? Does He reign over the relatively minor frustrating circumstances that you faced last week?

This gets rather practical, doesn't it? And it gets even more practical when you consider the psalmist's application, that the Lord's reign should be a cause for rejoicing. He does *not* say, "The Lord reigns; grit your teeth and grudgingly submit." He certainly does *not* say, "The Lord reigns; shake your fist at Him and let Him know how angry you are because of your trials." No, he clearly says, "The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice." The Lord's sovereignty should cause all people to be glad.

But the psalm also reveals that many people do not rejoice because of God's reign. Some are His adversaries (97:3), whom God will destroy by His righteous judgment. Some, represented poetically as mountains, will melt like wax at the presence of the Lord (97:5). Those who serve idols will be ashamed or confounded when the Lord displays His glory (97:6-7). Some of the wicked attack God's people (97:10), but they will not ultimately succeed. So the message of Psalm 97 is,

Because the Lord reigns over all, His saints should rejoice,  
but sinners should fear His coming judgment.

We don't know who wrote Psalm 97. Some attribute it to David. Others say that it was written after the exiles returned to Jerusalem from Babylon. It occurs in a group of psalms (93-100) that joyfully emphasize God's kingship. "The Lord reigns" occurs in 93:1; 96:10; here; and, 99:1 (plus in 47:8; 146:10). Psalm 97:1 pieces together two verses from Psalm 96, verse 10, "the Lord reigns," and verse 11, "let the earth rejoice."

Several different outlines for the psalm have been suggested. I am following the three-paragraph breakdown of the NASB. The theme of the Lord's reign is stated at the outset and is implicit throughout the psalm. Each of the three paragraphs emphasizes the theme of joy: (1) The Lord reigns: Let the earth rejoice and bow in fear because of His coming judgment (97:1-6). (2) The Lord reigns: Let idolaters be ashamed, but let His people rejoice (97:7-9). (3) The Lord reigns: Let those who love Him hate evil and be glad in Him (97:10-12).

1. The Lord reigns: Let the earth rejoice and bow in fear because of His coming judgment (97:1-6).
  - A. The theme stated: The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice (97:1).

In the second line, "let the many islands be glad," the *islands* represent "the remote, innumerable outposts of mankind" (Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 350). The psalmist is showing that the Lord's reign is not limited to Israel. It extends to the far corners of the earth. There is an implicit prophecy here, because those who dwell in these remote outposts cannot possibly be glad in the Lord's reign unless they hear the good news of His salvation. The same extension of the gospel to all is implicit in verse 6, which says, "all the peoples have seen His glory." As we saw last week, the gospel displays the glory of Christ. Also, explicit in the gospel is the message of Christ's lordship. People cannot be saved if they do not willingly submit to the reign of Jesus Christ in their hearts.

In fact, the Lord's reign can only be a source of joy to you when you submit to Him. Atheists challenge God's reign and accuse Him of being the author of evil: "If the Lord reigns over war and natural disasters and disease, then He is not only the author of evil, but He is evil Himself." These blatant blasphemies have been

the subject of several best-sellers in the past few years. For example, Richard Dawkins, in *The God Delusion* [Houghton Mifflin, 2006], accuses the God of the Old Testament as being “arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction.” I won’t cite all of his blasphemous name-calling, but he rants about this God being a “megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” (p. 31). This is the same man who, with a straight face, tells Ben Stein (in the movie “Expelled”) that life on this planet may have begun when aliens from outer space came here!

But taking God out of the picture does not solve the problem of evil. In a world without God, little kids would still get blown up by terrorists and swept away by floods and die by disease. If you eliminate God, all you do is eliminate hope and justice. You turn the world into a very bleak place. If you’re lucky enough to be born in America, you might survive longer than the kid born in Afghanistan, unless you’re so unlucky as to contract a fatal disease. You live a few years and then you die. There’s no hope!

Jesus addressed the problem of innocent people suffering from evil tyrants and from natural disasters. In Luke 13, He talked about a group of Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. He also brought up a situation where 18 people had died when a tower in Siloam fell on them. His application was, “Do you suppose that these people were somehow worse sinners than others because they suffered this fate?” His answer, repeated twice, was (Luke 13:3, 5), “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” In other words, we’re all going to die. God is sovereign over the timing of our death. The key question is, have you repented of your sin and trusted Christ before you die?

But in spite of the fact that God’s sovereignty is clearly taught in the Bible, many professing Christians object to it. They either argue (along with the atheist), that it makes God the author of evil; or they say that if God controls all that happens, it destroys our free will. Asahel Nettleton (1783-1843), an American evangelist, has an insightful sermon on Psalm 97:1 where he addresses these issues. He argues that God “exercises absolute control over both the natural and moral world ... and that no event, great or small, ever takes place which is not included in His eternal purpose, and which is not made to subserve His ultimate designs” (*Asahel Nettle-*

*ton, Life and Labours*, by Bennet Tyler & Andrew Bonar [Banner of Truth], p. 199). He supports this with Ephesians 1:11, that God “works all things after the counsel of His will.”

He goes on to argue that if this doctrine is not true, then there is no point in praying. Why pray that God would save your loved ones, if God cannot operate on their hearts? Why pray that God would restrain the wicked, if by doing so He would destroy their freedom? And he argues that it is a cause for great joy to believers that God actually does govern all of His creation, including wicked men and devils. It would be a gloomy world beyond description if God has made creatures whom He cannot govern.

Let me apply this to the difficult circumstances that you may be facing right now. They may be major, such as a life-threatening disease, or they may be relatively minor, such as car trouble. If you will stop long enough to acknowledge that the Lord reigns over these problems, and you submit to His rightful rule, it will bring you great joy. You will know that these things did not happen by accident, but rather by the loving care of the God who will work these things together for your good to conform you to the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29). But if you don't stop to acknowledge that the Lord reigns over these problems, you will become depressed or anxious or angry. So the truth that the Lord reigns is a cause for rejoicing *if* you submit to His sovereignty.

B. The flip side of the theme: Those that are not subject to the Lord should fear His coming in judgment (97:2-6).

The picture suddenly shifts from rejoicing and gladness to a rather frightening encounter with God's presence (97:2-6):

Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Fire goes before Him and burns up His adversaries round about. His lightnings lit up the world; the earth saw and trembled. The mountains melted like wax at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth. The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory.

This picture comes largely from God's appearance at Mount Sinai, when Israel was in the wilderness (Exod. 19:16-19):

So it came about on the third day, when it was morning, that there were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain and a very loud trumpet sound, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace and the whole mountain quaked violently. When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder.

The same phenomena occurred on another occasion when God spoke to Moses (Exod. 34:5) and later when Israel routed their enemy under Deborah (Judges 5:4-5). Many prophets had similar frightening visions of God involving smoke, lightning, fire, thunder, and earthquakes (Isa. 6:1-4; Ezek. 1:4-28; Dan. 7:9-14; Micah 1:3-4; Hab. 3:3-15; see, also Ps. 18:7-15; 50:3; Heb. 12:18-21, 29). These were all men and women who were God's servants. If they feared God's presence, how much more should those who will face His judgment when He comes! Clearly, the God of the whole earth is not one to be taken lightly or casually!

James Boice (*Psalms* [Baker], 2:791) observes that God is not some great heavenly buddy or pal. He adds, "In fact, the common lightness of many in approaching God is not a sign of their close acquaintance with him, as they probably suppose, but of the fact that they hardly know God at all." I once heard John MacArthur tell of a pastor friend of his who told him that Jesus often appeared to him when he was shaving. John incredulously asked, "*And you keep shaving?*" If the risen, glorious Lord Jesus *really* appeared to us, we'd either be struck to the ground as Paul was, or fall on our faces like dead men, as John did. It would be a traumatic experience!

Derek Kidner (p. 350) succinctly explains the symbolism of our text: "*Clouds and thick darkness* warn of His unapproachable holiness and hiddenness to presumptuous man . . . , while the *fire* and *lightnings* reveal a holiness that is also devouring and irresistible (cf. Heb. 12:29). There is no escape. To speak of mountains melting is to see the most immemorial landmarks disappear, the most solid of refuges dissolve." Because of God's power, none of His enemies

will escape when He comes in judgment. He will judge the world in righteousness and defeat all His enemies. The beast and the false prophet and all that followed them will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 19:11-21).

Let me underscore the important lesson in our text: God's absolute sovereignty over everything—whether our salvation or evil people or difficult trials—should be a source of great joy, not a cause of stumbling. I know of Christians who dodge the doctrine of God's sovereignty because it's difficult to understand. I know of pastors who will not preach on it, because it's controversial. But it occurs repeatedly in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. God didn't put it there to cause you to stumble, but to cause you to rejoice. In fact, the only time in the Bible when Jesus greatly rejoiced was over God's sovereignty in hiding His truth from some, but revealing it to others (Luke 10:21-24). And, the only way you will rejoice in the truth of God's sovereignty is not when you can logically understand it, but when you submit to God as the one who can do as He pleases with His creation (Rom. 9:11-24).

2. The Lord reigns: Let idolaters be ashamed, but let His people rejoice (97:7-9).

A. The Lord reigns: Let idolaters be ashamed (97:7).

“Let all those be ashamed who serve graven images, who boast themselves of idols; worship Him all you gods.” The reason for their shame is that they have put their trust in and served man-made objects that are nothings or nonentities.

There is debate about the phrase, “worship Him all you gods.” The LXX translates *gods* with the word *angels*. The author of Hebrews (1:6) either cites this verse or Deuteronomy 32:43 (LXX) when he writes, “‘And let all the angels of God worship Him.’” While *gods* in Psalm 97:7 could be a reference to angels (or demons), it seems to me that in the context, it is a synonym for graven images and idols. By commanding the idols to worship the true God, the psalmist is using sarcasm, saying, “Your so-called gods, if they have any real being at all, must worship the only true God.” Even if the idolaters were consciously worshipping demons, those demons are subject to the Sovereign God.

The fact is, everyone who is not in submission to the Sovereign Lord is serving idols of some kind. They may not set up actual statues to pray to, but they serve the idol of self or money or sexual pleasure or fame or power. As Jesus pointed out, you either serve God or money, but not both (Luke 16:13). If we boast in anything other than the Lord as our help and deliverer, we are boasting in stupid idols.

B. The Lord reigns: Let His people rejoice (97:8-9).

“Zion heard this and was glad, and the daughters of Judah have rejoiced, because of Your judgments, O Lord. For You are the Lord Most High over all the earth; You are exalted far above all gods.” These verses may be celebrating some unnamed victory that God granted Israel over her enemies. But the final fulfillment awaits the second coming of Jesus Christ, who (as we saw in Ps. (96:13) is coming to “judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His faithfulness.” Then the entire world will realize (many too late!) that the risen Lord Jesus is “the Lord Most High over all the earth.” He is exalted “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come” (Eph. 1:21). Thus His people should rejoice.

Thus the Lord reigns: Let the earth rejoice and bow in fear before Him (97:1-6). The Lord reigns: Let idolaters be ashamed, but let His people rejoice (97:7-9).

3. The Lord reigns: Let those who love Him hate evil and be glad in Him (97:10-12).

First, there is a command (10a); then, the psalmist lists three blessings for those who obey the command (10b-11); finally, he gives a summary command (12).

A. The command: Hate evil, you who love the Lord (97:10a).

That command is obvious and perfectly logical, and yet it jars you. It is obvious and logical in that you cannot love the Lord who is absolutely holy and at the same time love the sin that is antithetical to His entire being. You are inconsistent if you say, “I love Jesus,” and yet you love the sin that put Him on the cross.

And yet that command jars us, in that we don't think of God in terms of hating anything. As American Christians, we've over-emphasized His love to the point that we've set aside His holiness and His judgment of all sin. Yet the Bible plainly states of God (Ps. 5:5-6), "You hate all who do iniquity. You destroy those who speak falsehood; the Lord abhors the man of bloodshed and deceit."

If you know Christ as Savior, you must be growing to hate evil, beginning with your own sin. Granted, as long as they are in this body, even the most godly of saints will experience a perverse attraction to certain sins. But at the same time, we must hate it and fight against it. If we don't, we don't love the Lord.

- B. The blessings promised for those who hate evil and love the Lord: preservation, light, and gladness (97:10b-11).

God "*preserves* the souls of His godly ones; He delivers them from the hand of the wicked" (97:10b). This implies that hating evil may be costly (Kidner, p. 351). It creates enemies. While I was preparing this message, I got a phone call from my good friend in Nepal who said that he had received a phone call earlier in the day from a militant Hindu group, threatening his life and the lives of his family because they are Christians. They also threatened to bomb his church this week when they gather to worship.

When I told him that I was preparing this sermon on Psalm 97, he said that he had read Psalm 97 to his family in their devotions that evening. I'm preaching the psalm, but they're living it in a life or death situation! The promise of deliverance may be through death, as the martyrs in the Bible testify (Heb. 11:37). But even if evil enemies kill our bodies, they cannot separate us from the infinite love of God for us in Christ (Rom. 8:32-39).

The Lord not only gives preservation, but also *light*. The picture of God *sowing* light implies that it increases gradually and over time. It also implies that we will have enough light from God for each step of our pilgrimage. That light comes from His Word, which is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105).

The Lord also promises "*gladness* for the upright in heart." *Upright in heart* is a synonym for *godly ones* (97:10b) and *the righteous* (97:11a). It shows us that genuine godliness is a matter of the heart. If our hearts (thoughts) are not right before God, our "righteous-

ness" is just a hypocritical veneer (Mark 7:6-7, 21-23). If our hearts are upright before the Lord, we will be experiencing His joy.

- C. Final summary command: Be glad in the Lord you righteous ones and give thanks to His holy name (97:12).

Even though gladness is promised in verse 11, it is still commanded in verse 12. It's not automatic. As John Piper writes, we have to fight for joy. Don't miss that our gladness is "*in the Lord.*" He is the source of our joy. And that joy is only for the *righteous*, those who walk in obedience to Him. The last phrase is literally, "give thanks for the memory of His holiness." (The same phrase occurs in Ps. 30:4, which refers to Exod. 3:15.) When we think on the Lord, the thing that should come to mind is His holiness. That would cause us to shrink back, except for the fact that we find acceptance in His holy presence through the blood of His Son Jesus.

### Conclusion

C. H. Spurgeon (*The Treasury of David* [Baker], 4:360) cites the story of a man named Whitelock, who was Oliver Cromwell's envoy to Sweden in 1653. One night as he was waiting to sail, he was so distracted by the troubles of the nation that he could not sleep. His assistant, in an adjacent bed, finally said to him, "Sir, may I ask you a question?" "Of course," said Whitelock.

"Sir, do you think God governed the world very well before you came into it?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And sir, do you think that He will govern it quite as well when you are gone out of it?"

"Certainly."

"Then, sir, excuse me, but do you not think you may trust him to govern it quite as well while you are living?"

Whitelock had no answer to this question, but he rolled over and soon went to sleep.

Do you believe that the Lord reigns, not only over the world, but also in your life? If so, rejoice and be glad in Him!

## Application Questions

1. How would you answer a mother who asked, "Was God reigning when my child died?" (Or, "was molested?")
2. How would you answer someone who said, "If God is sovereign over evil, then He is responsible for it?"
3. Does the fact that God is sovereign cause you to rejoice or does it make you stumble? Why? If the latter, how can it be turned into rejoicing?
4. How can we grow to hate more the evil within ourselves?

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