

Psalm 98 “Grace and Truth Came Through Jesus Christ”
Psalm 98/99
John 1:14-18

December 10, 2017

In the Hebrew, the title of this Psalm is simply:

A Psalm.

But in the Syriac translation, they added, “Of the redemption of the people from Egypt.”

In other words, already before the time of Christ,
the Jews thought of book 4 *both* in terms of the return from exile –
and in terms of the redemption from Egypt.

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 99.

Psalm 99 has three parts, each of which ends with the declaration: “He is holy!”
Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD God Almighty...

Psalm 99 is the “Trisagion” (the “thrice-holy”) of the Old Testament.
And the connection with Isaiah 6 goes even further –
since the second line of Psalm 99 says, “he sits enthroned upon the cherubim.”

If Psalm 98 is calling for shouting and singing praise to God,
Psalm 99 calls us to tremble in awe before his holy throne!

And the second stanza of Psalm 99 says that the *reason* for the peoples to tremble
is because the King has established equity and executed righteousness
(precisely the things that the LORD does when he comes in judgment in Psalm 98).

The third stanza of Psalm 99 then reminds us of Moses and Aaron and Samuel –
those who called upon the LORD, and the LORD answered them!

Psalm 99 reminds us of the pillar of cloud – as well as the cherubim on the mercy seat –
and remember that “cherubim” are not sweet “dimpled darlings” –
but according to Ezekiel they are fierce beasts,
with the body of a lion, large wings, and a human face.
They are the guardians of God’s holy place –
and the steeds upon which God rides!

The basic idea of Psalm 99 is to connect Moses, Samuel, and us.

Moses and Aaron were the ones through whom the Law came.
(The Law came through Moses)

But Samuel was the one who anointed King David.

There is a clear Davidic reference in Psalm 99.
Remember Moses – through whom the Law and the Tabernacle came.
Remember Samuel – through whom the King and thus the Temple came.

The LORD our God answered them –
the LORD our God forgave them –
and yes, the LORD our God avenged their wrongdoings
(Moses could not enter the promised land because he did not treat God’s name as holy –
David’s sons were judged for their failure to keep God’s commands),

But the LORD our God is *holy, holy, holy*.

If he answered Moses and Aaron – if he answered Samuel – when they called upon him,
then we can be confident that the LORD our God will answer the One
who calls upon him in truth.

For the Law came by Moses, but grace and truth through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Sing Psalm 99
Read John 1:1-18

John tells us that those who receive Jesus – those who believe in his name –
are born “not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man,
but of God.”

Psalm 99 expresses a confidence that if God heard Moses, Aaron, and Samuel,
therefore God will hear us.

There is a good reason for that confidence.

A reason that is found at the heart of Psalm 99 –
even if the Israelites may not have fully understood it!
Because that Trisagion – that thrice-holy God of Psalm 99 –
turns out to be a Triune God – a Holy Trinity.
And the second Person of the Trinity – that Word that was in the beginning with God –
the Word which *was God* –
that Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

And when the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us –
only then do we understand *why* we can have confidence when we approach God!

After all, before the Word became flesh,
any time we got near the Holy Place,
we start seeing these scary-looking cherubim –
these lion-bodied, man-headed, monsters –
that blocked the way back into Eden –
that blocked the way into the Most Holy Place –
that guarded the presence of God –
keeping us out!!

But when the Word became flesh,
when the eternal Son of God – the only-begotten Son of the Father –
when *he* joined himself to our humanity,
 then we began to understand *why* God’s people have *always* had confidence
 to come with confidence into the presence of God!

All throughout the Old Testament you hear references to God’s steadfast love and faithfulness.
Hesed and emeth.

The glory of the only-begotten Son
is that he is full of *grace and truth*.
Grace and truth is not an exact translation of “hesed and emeth” (steadfast love and faithfulness).
But I believe that John is “riffing” on the theme of “hesed and emeth.”
The grace and truth that are found *in Jesus Christ*
 are the source and foundation of the *hesed* and *emeth* (God’s faithfulness)
 that we see throughout the Old Testament.

In other words, if you would understand the Psalms aright (and the whole OT aright),
then you must understand how they prefigure the Word who became flesh
and dwelt among us.

So how should we sing Psalm 98?

Eusebius of Caesarea lived from about 260-340 AD –
 which means that he lived through the persecutions of the earthly 4th century –
 when the Roman emperor, Diocletian, tried to wipe out the Christian church.
He also lived through the conversion of Constantine –
 and the Imperial Edict of Milan that declared the official toleration of Christianity.

This means that Eusebius also lived into the beginning
of that most amazing period of church history
when the Roman empire flipped from persecuting the church
to encouraging and patronizing the church.

When Eusebius wrote his “Ecclesiastical History” –
he opened book 10 with a quotation from Psalm 98,
after which he said,

“Accordingly, let me now sing the new song,
since after those grim and horrifying scenes and narratives,
 I was now privileged to see and to celebrate
 what many righteous people and martyrs of God before me
 desired to see but did not see
 and to hear but did not hear.

But they hurried on to far better things in the heavens,
caught up into a paradise of divine bliss, while I,
admitting that even the present circumstances are more than I deserve,
have been totally astonished at the magnitude of grace he has conferred
and offer him my total awe and worship.” (p199)

You sometimes hear people complain that Constantine destroyed the church.
But those who lived through the fourth century
were singing Psalm 98 in response to the conversion of Constantine!

Sure, imperial patronage brought problems –
but overall, it is a *good thing* when people believe the gospel!

Psalm 98 is a great song to sing – first about the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us –
and then about every situation where the salvation of our God is made known!

Psalm 98 has three main commands –
Sing, Shout, and Roar!
And these commands are particularly addressed to
Israel, All the Earth, and All Creation.

1. “Sing” – Salvation for Israel and All the Ends of the Earth (v1-3)
a. Salvation Belongs to the LORD (v1-2)

*98 Oh sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done marvelous things!
His right hand and his holy arm
have worked salvation for him.*

² *The LORD has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.*

So sing to the LORD a new song –
a victory song – a salvation song!

In Exodus 15, it was also God’s “right hand” that shattered the enemy.
In Exodus 15, the LORD led his people in steadfast love (*hesed*)
as the nations watched in dismay.

There are definitely echoes of Exodus 15 here –
but there is also a new twist.

In the Exodus, the salvation of Israel struck terror into the heart of the nations.
God saved his people *from* their enemies –

and you really don’t see much hope for the nations –

except insofar as people leave their homeland and join themselves to Israel

Psalm 98 has a much more explicitly positive attitude toward the nations.

In the Exodus, the peoples were trembling before the LORD.
In Psalm 98, the peoples are singing for joy before the LORD.

And verse 2 helps us to see why.

*Because the LORD has made known his salvation;
he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations.*

Think about that.

In Hebrew poetry, there is a certain parallelism between the two lines of a couplet.
That doesn't mean that the two lines both mean the same thing!
But the two lines connect in some way.

What does it mean for God to “reveal his righteousness in the sight of the nations”?
Righteousness has to do with how someone orders their community – their society.
Justice has to do with doing the right thing in a particular case.

Next week, we will be looking at what this means at the level of the household –
what does it mean to practice righteousness at home and at work
(since the “household” in the ancient world included both home and work!).

Psalm 98 focuses on what it means for *God* to reveal his righteousness.

If God is righteous,
then that means that God will order *his world* rightly.
And sometimes, when you look around,
you wonder, *is God righteous?*

Psalm 89 had wondered that out loud:

“Lord, where is your steadfast love of old,
which by your faithfulness you swore to David?” (89:49)

It's all good and fine to say “the wages of sin is death” –
and we acknowledge that this is true! –
but if God is righteous – then we can be confident
that he will do all that he has promised –
and that as we examine the course of history,
we will *see* his righteousness vindicated over time.

Think of how Eusebius used this Psalm.

After the church endured nearly 300 years of martyrdom and suffering,
Eusebius saw the righteousness of God revealed.
The righteousness of God is revealed
when the church grows and flourishes.

You see the righteousness of God revealed in the Exodus –
you see the righteousness of God revealed in the return from Exile.
You see the righteousness of God revealed in the conversion of the nations –

as the salvation of the Gentiles *vindicates* the justice of God.

We should expect the history of the church
to conform in various ways to the pattern of God's righteousness.

Think about what Jesus says,
Don't worry about what you will eat, or what you will wear.
"But Seek first the kingdom of God and *his righteousness* –
and then all these things will be added to you."

Seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness
means that our first priority
is to live as the household of God under his righteous pattern.

And what is that pattern?
The pattern of the cross.
The way of the cross is the only way to glory.
But that pattern doesn't mean that "in this life all we get is suffering"!
Yes, there will be periods of suffering – times of trial and affliction –
but then, *in history*, the righteousness of God will be revealed!

If the Christian life was *only* the book of Lamentations and Psalms 88-89 – or Psalm 10 –
then we would rightly question whether God was just!
That is why God also gives us Psalm 98!

Because to the question of Psalm 89 –
"where is your steadfast love...?"
Psalm 98 answers:

b. For the Jew First and also for the Greek (v3)

³ *He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the salvation of our God.*

Steadfast love and faithfulness – *hesed* and *emeth*.
These are the things that God remembers –
his faithfulness – his covenant loyalty – the fact that he does what he promises!
In John 1, John tells us that the law came through Moses,
grace and truth comes through Jesus Christ.

As we said earlier, grace and truth are not so much a translation of *hesed* and *emeth*.
But if you think about the *point* of Psalm 98, verse 3,
what does it mean for God to remember his steadfast love and faithfulness?
It means that God acts in history to bring about his promises –

to bring salvation to all the ends of the earth –
even to South Bend, Indiana!

And yes, what God did in bringing his people out of Egypt showed *hesed* and *emeth* –
steadfast love and faithfulness – covenant loyalty – faithfulness to his promises.
And yes, what God did in restoring his people from exile in Babylon showed *hesed* and *emeth* –
steadfast love and faithfulness – covenant loyalty – faithfulness to his promises

But there is something about what Jesus did that goes beyond *hesed* and *emeth*.
That’s why John does not simply say “steadfast love and faithfulness” in John 1.
The law came through Moses,
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

Throughout the OT, there is no better way of describing the righteousness of God
than *hesed* and *emeth* – steadfast love and faithfulness.

But when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us,
we needed a better way to say it!

Isaiah had said in Isaiah 52:10 –
“All the ends of the earth *shall see* the salvation of our God”

And now Psalm 98:3 says,
“All the ends of the earth *have seen* the salvation of our God.”

For we have seen his glory – the glory as of the only-begotten Son of the Father –
full of grace and truth.

And so part two of our song, calls us to *shout!!*

2. “Shout” – All the Earth Should Sing Praise to the LORD (v4-6)
a. Shouting, Singing, and Musical Instruments (v4-6a)

- ⁴ *Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!*
⁵ *Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!*
⁶ *With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!*

Shout to the LORD, all the earth!
It’s not “whisper quietly under your breath so no one can hear you!”
No, it’s SHOUT!!

Why do we shout at sporting events?
To celebrate the great... and... mighty deeds...

um, well, the routine and mildly impressive accomplishments
of athletes who did exactly the same thing last week...

Okay – so we shout to celebrate a Clayton Kershaw strikeout.
He does that 200 times every year.
We shout when LeBron James dunks the basketball –
he does *that* 200 times every year!

I'm not going to argue that a worship service should look like a sports event –
rather, I would argue that the problem with modern sports
is that they become a sort of liturgy –
the place where modern man goes to find joy, peace, and meaning
in a world that has lost all sense of righteousness, peace, and salvation.

“The law came through Moses;
grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God;
the only begotten God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.”

Break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

Verses 4-6 urge all the peoples of the earth to sing praise to God.
Of course, the context is still the temple –
the context is still temple worship where the Levitical musicians sing and play.

In verse 6, the “trumpet” is a metal instrument.
The “horn” is a ram's horn.
The ram's horn is not really a *musical* instrument.
You cannot really play a “tune” on a ram's horn.
Blowing a ram's horn is good for sounding a blast –
whether for calling people to battle – or calling people to worship!
But whether you use a metal trumpet or a ram's horn,
the effect is largely the same:
a loud blast that calls the people!

And so verse six says “with trumpets and the sound of the horn
shout before the King, the LORD.”

The victory shout *here* is made through blowing the blast on the trumpet.

If you think about it,
this is where we got the old custom of having a bell tower,
so that people would know when to gather,
because they would hear the church bells tolling.

b. The King, the LORD (v6b)

And at the end of verse 6, we are called to shout before the King, the LORD.

Again, the people of Israel were without a Son of David – without a King on earth.

But still they knew that the LORD is King –

and that the LORD’s kingship is not just about his sovereignty over all things.

He is King in his holy Temple.

And that Kingship – that Kingdom –

is fundamentally connected to God’s promise to David.

That’s why Psalm 89 is always in the background here in Book 4 of the Psalter.

3. “Roar” – All Creation Rejoices at the Coming of the LORD (v7-9)

a. Seas and World, Rivers and Hills (v7-8)

⁷ *Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!*

⁸ *Let the rivers clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together*

The first line of 98:7 may look familiar –
we saw it last week in 96:11!

The thunder of the sea gives praise to God.

But then the second line of verse 7 borrows from Psalm 89:11
“the world and all that is in it.”

Psalm 96 had focused on the three realms of creation –
the heavens, the earth, and the seas.

Psalm 98 focuses on the earth and the seas.

After all, the heavens correspond to God’s holy dwelling place.

In that respect, the heavens were never corrupted by sin.

But the earth and the seas are that part of creation
that had been placed under man’s dominion.

And since Psalm 98 is referring to the revelation of God’s righteousness –
the coming of salvation and judgment to all the earth,
the focus of the praise is on those parts of the created order
that were particularly affected by Adam’s sin.

Think of how Paul develops this theme in Romans 8:18-23

“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time
are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.
For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.
For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly,

but because of him who subjected it,
in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption
and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.
For we know that the whole creation
has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.
And not only the creation, but we ourselves,
who have the firstfruits of the Spirit,
groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons,
the redemption of our bodies.”

The creation groans with us – the creation rejoices with us –
there is a connection between creation and humanity.

And you see the same thing in Psalm 98.

I like how Robert Alter says it:

“There is a concordance between the human orchestra –
in all likelihood, an actual orchestra accompanying the singing of this psalm –
with its lutes and rams’ horns, and the orchestra of nature,
both groups providing a grand fanfare for God the king.
The thundering of the sea is a percussion section,
joined by the clapping hands of the rivers,
then the chorus of the mountains.
This simple, compact poem,... is resonantly expressive:
the Israelites chanting the poem’s words of exaltation,
to the accompaniment of musical instruments,
are invited to imagine their musical rite as part of a cosmic performance.” (345)

We saw last time the way in which the ancients thought of audible music
as an expression of the music of the spheres – the cosmic music.
When you lose your temper – you have lost your pitch –
you are “out of tune” with the universe, with others, and with God!

Think of King Saul, whose trouble from an evil spirit could only be soothed
by the young David playing on his harp.
We often focus on how it was *David* whose playing brought Saul back from his disharmony,
but we should equally focus on how David’s *playing* brought Saul back into tune.

What we sing – what we play – should help to bring us back into tune
with God, with the universe, with each other!

And that is where our Psalm concludes:
because the creation itself is roaring –
the rivers are clapping their hands,
the hills are singing for joy together...

b. Righteousness and Equity in the Coming of the LORD (v9)

⁹ *before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.*

*He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.*

The closing lines of Psalm 98 are almost identical with Psalm 96.

The chief difference is in the final word.

In Psalm 96 the final word is “faithfulness” –

but here in Psalm 98 the final word is “equity” (or “fairness”).

Why should all the world rejoice in the coming of the LORD?

Because the LORD will judge the world with righteousness.

He will make everything *right*.

And he will judge the peoples with equity –

he will be fair and even-handed in his dealings with the nations.

The point of *equity* is that sometimes the rules don’t really apply to a particular situation.

You might think that God’s laws are exempt from this.

After all, God’s laws are perfect!

But Jesus teaches us otherwise.

When his disciples were accused of breaking the Sabbath by plucking grain,

Jesus pointed out that David had eaten the holy bread,

that only the priests were supposed to eat –

and for that matter, the priests regularly work on the Sabbath –

or to use Jesus’ term, “profane” the Sabbath,

and yet are guiltless.

Jesus’ conclusion is *not* that the Pharisees had misconstrued the rules.

Rather, Jesus’ conclusion is that *the Sabbath is made for man,*

not man for the Sabbath.

In other words,

a rigid interpretation of the law will sometimes produce injustice!

Even a rigid interpretation of the Ten Commandments!

But no one should be surprised by Jesus’ statement here.

After all, Psalm 98 had concluded that Jesus would judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

Jesus is not going to be persnickety at the final judgment.

He will be *fair*.

And as we have often seen in the Psalms,

there will be a sort of poetic justice.

As you have judged others, so will you be judged.

This often causes people to say,
“Oh, well, then, I will never judge anyone else!”

So, if you see a bully beating up a helpless little boy,
what are you going to do?
I hope that you will pass judgment on that bully –
and come to the rescue of that little boy!

If you see a mother destroying herself with drugs –
bringing harm to her children through her self-destructive behavior,
what are you going to do?
I hope that you will pass *judgment* and do something to rescue those children!

You see, if you take a fully non-judgmental stance
then ironically, you *are* passing judgment *against* the weak and helpless!

If Jesus is the Word who became flesh –
if grace and truth have truly come through Jesus Christ, our Lord –
then Jesus is the one who judges the world in righteousness,
and the peoples with equity.

And his righteousness – his equity –
is to be expressed in his kingdom –
and the church is *supposed* to be the place
where his kingdom comes, where his will is done
on earth as it is in heaven.

Let us pray.