

Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise

Sermon for April 23, 2023

Psalm 96

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This week we are looking at Psalm 96 to begin a six-week sermon series:

"How the Psalms Teach us to Pray."

There are 150 psalms in your bible, most of them written 3,000 years ago.

When we read these songs and prayers, we discover that people have not changed in 3,000 years.

These authors have the same doubts, fears, sins, hopes, and emotions as us.

God put their human words in His Word--prayers of unbelief, frustration, and even anger.

God is not afraid of our messy emotions and heretical doubts.

In these 150 psalms, God provides answers for our questions and comfort for our sorrow.

In the weeks ahead, we will learn from Psalm 77 how to pray in times of depression and anxiety.

Psalm 137 will teach us what to do with our anger when we see evil and persecution in the world.

We will learn from Psalm 51 how to be honest about our sin so God can heal us.

We begin our series with Psalm 96 because it's a great example of how prayer should begin with praise.

Hear now the Word of the Lord.

1 Sing to the Lord a new song;

 sing to the Lord, all the earth.

2 Sing to the Lord, praise his name;

 proclaim his salvation day after day.

3 Declare his glory among the nations,

 his marvelous deeds among all peoples.

4 For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;

 he is to be feared above all gods.

5 For all the gods of the nations are idols,

 but the Lord made the heavens.

6 Splendor and majesty are before him;

 strength and glory are in his sanctuary.

7 Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations,

 ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

8 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;

 bring an offering and come into his courts.

9 Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness;

 tremble before him, all the earth.

10 Say among the nations, "The Lord reigns."

The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;

he will judge the peoples with equity.

11 Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;

let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

12 Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;

let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.

13 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.

Together we read Isaiah 40:8:

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Please pray with me.

Father in heaven, we come to you because you are the source of life and truth.

Jesus, we worship because you are full of mercy and love.

Holy Spirit, please open our hearts and minds to be transformed by the word of God, amen.

Almost every verse in Psalm 96 begins with a command to sing, proclaim, declare, ascribe, or say.

Who is listening to all this singing and speaking?

I see three different audiences in Psalm 96, so that's how we will analyze this text:

- 1) The first audience is the Lord.
- 2) Our own hearts are the second audience.
- 3) The entire world is the third audience.

Verses 1 and 2 make clear that the primary audience is the Lord.

1 "Sing to the Lord a new song;

sing to the Lord, all the earth.

2 Sing to the Lord, praise his name;

proclaim his salvation day after day."

Psalm 96 invites us, actually commands us, to worship the Lord.

Psalm 96 was first written to celebrate the day that the Ark of the Covenant was brought to Jerusalem.

The Ark represented the presence of God.

Listen to 1 Chronicles 16:4-7.

4 "David appointed the following Levites to lead the people in worship before the Ark of the Lord--

to invoke his blessings, to give thanks, and to praise the Lord, the God of Israel.

5 Asaph, the leader of this group, sounded the cymbals.

Second to him was Zechariah, followed by Jeiel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obed-edom, and Jeiel.

They played the harps and lyres.

6 The priests, Benaiah and Jahaziel, played the trumpets regularly before the Ark of God's Covenant.

7 Then on that day David first appointed that thanksgiving be sung to the Lord by Asaph and his brothers."

Psalm 96 was written for that worship service.

David formed a praise band, with Asaph as the worship leader.

Asaph had a job much like Andrew, our worship leader at One Voice.

Asaph had a team of musicians and singers, just as we do today.

These two bands have the same focus and purpose:

to lead God's people as they sing and pray to the Lord.

This gathering we are at right now is called a "worship service."

We have music, but this is not a concert for our entertainment.

We study the Bible, but this is not a classroom for our education.

Our primary reason for gathering every week is to worship, praise, and honor the one true God.

We also pray to Him and bring requests to him.

But before we ask for anything, our prayers should first acknowledge and adore God for who he is.

That's why the Lord's Prayer begins with:

"Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed by your name."

Throughout human history, people around the world have invented gods to worship.

Historically people thought that their gods were tied to the land and the people.

The people in India had their own gods, and the people in Mexico had theirs.

People in China worshipped their Chinese ancestors, while Vikings worshipped their Viking ancestors.

It was always assumed that our ethnicity, culture, and religion were all tied together.

But the God of the Bible makes a bold claim.

He says that all the other gods are "un-gods."

Listen again to verses 4 and 5:

4 "For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise;

he is to be feared above all gods.

5 For all the gods of the nations are idols,

but the Lord made the heavens."

The Hebrew word translated "idols" in verse 5 is elil.

A literal translation of the word is "un-gods" or "not-gods."

The one true God made the heavens and earth.

When you worship created things instead of the Creator Himself, you insult him and deceive yourself.

Listen again to verses 7-9.

7 "Ascribe to the Lord, all you families of nations,

ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

8 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;

bring an offering and come into his courts.

9 Worship the Lord in the splendor of his holiness;

tremble before him, all the earth."

The human soul is wired for worship.

We say, "this ice cream is delicious," or "that sunset is beautiful."

Ascribe means to acknowledge or give credit.

We give credit to an artist or chef when they create something amazing.

When people compliment me for a dinner I made, I often say:

"God made the ingredients, I just put them together."

That's what verse 8a means:

8a "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;"

Look at these athletes.

Thousands of people in the audience are celebrating them and praising their skill.

Why are the athletes pointing up?

To ascribe glory to the Lord.

They are saying:

"Don't worship me, worship the one who made me in His image.

God gave me these legs and arms, this mind and these skills."

Everything good that we have comes from God our Father, but we forget this.

That's why verse 8b says:

"bring an offering and come into his courts."

When we give our tithes and offerings to God, we are preaching truth to our own hearts.

We are reminding ourselves:

"This money is not truly mine--God gave me the mind, the hands, the opportunity.

Everything I have belongs to him."

We need to be reminded of this frequently, my friends.

That's why in worship, our own hearts are the second audience.

Everyone's heart attaches itself to whatever we value most highly.

Most of us don't think we are tempted by idol worship.

We don't bow down to statues or worship in pagan temples.

But when this psalm was written 3,000 years ago, each of the idols represented something.


People worshipped gods of rain, or war, or healing, or fertility.

False gods were invented to meet the needs or desires of the people who made them.

And modern idols do the exact same thing.

I'll give you a few examples.

Maybe your heart is focused on getting a promotion at work.

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Your heart whispers to you:

"When you get the promotion you will be happy, respected, and financially secure."

If you believe your heart, then you will make sacrifices.

You might sacrifice time with your family, or honesty, or your health.

Because idols like success always demand sacrifice.

Here's another example.

Imagine a teenage girl whose heart is focused on going to the dance with the most-popular boy in school.

Her heart whispers to her:

"When he asks you to the dance, then you will be popular, and valued, and happy."

If this girl believes the lies of her heart, she will make sacrifices.

She might sacrifice her health, her values, her dignity, to follow the compass of her heart.

Disney movies and popular culture encourage us all to "follow your heart."

But what if your heart's compass is pointing you in the wrong direction?

I love this hand towel that my son gave to my wife for her birthday last week.

"DON'T follow your heart," it says, referring to Jeremiah 17:9.

9 "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"

In other words, your heart won't tell you the truth, so don't follow it.

If you don't know what lies your heart is telling you, then you can ask these diagnostic questions:

Where do I devote most of my time, money, and thought?

What am I ashamed of?

What makes me angry very easily?

Our anger is often triggered when something threatens our perceived source of peace, joy, or security.

Let's take 30 seconds now.

Ask the Holy Spirit to help you see where your heart is pointing.

What is your heart overly attached to?

Where are you looking for hope?

(30 seconds of silent prayer)

My friends, God-focused worship and prayer can reorient the devotion of our hearts.

All week long, many things demand our attention, trust, and praise.

But work will not satisfy your hunger for significance.

Money will not bring you peace and security.

Food, alcohol, and entertainment cannot numb your guilt, loneliness, or fears.

These are elil, "non-gods" that cannot save you.

We insult and offend the one true God when we give our hearts, worship, and trust to created things instead of the Creator.

Listen again to verse 13:

13 "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."

The idea of facing the King of the Universe as our judge is scary, because we know our faults and failures.

The very first commandment is:

"You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3).

In one way or another, we have all given our hearts, minds, and bodies to "non-gods."

God is justified to be angry with us.

But there is a way to escape God's judgment.

We need a substitute, we need a Savior.

Isaiah 53:4-5 says this about Christ our Savior:

4 "Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.

5 But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed."

This is the thing that distinguishes false gods from the one true God.

False gods demand sacrifice from you.

But Jesus became a sacrifice for you.

God the Father was willing to pour out his righteous judgment on Jesus instead of you.

He deserves our worship for his amazing grace and unparalleled mercy toward us.

Do you know what lies your heart is telling you?

Ask the Holy Spirit, and he will help you see inside your heart.

And then he gives you faith to reorient the compass of your heart to Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

When you trust in his name, Jesus gives you a new heart and a new direction.

Every week we remind you of these gospel truths.

Because THAT will recalibrate our hearts to help us throughout the week.

Romans 8:32 reminds us:

32 "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—
how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

Worship reminds our hearts who God is and what he has already done for us through Christ.

When we sing praises to God we are doing more than giving him compliments.

We are giving him ourselves.

Now to finish this message, let's look our third point.

3) The entire world is the third audience.

Psalm 96 is bursting with so much praise for God that all creation sings with us.

Listen to verses 11 and 12 again:

11 "Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;

let the sea resound, and all that is in it.

12 Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;

let all the trees of the forest sing for joy."

Trees do not have vocal cords, but if they can sing with joy, shouldn't we?

Joyful worship is a testimony, a message to the lost sheep the Lord is gathering from every people group on earth.

Listen to verse 3:

3 "Declare his glory among the nations,

his marvelous deeds among all peoples."

God's glory was first revealed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

But from the very beginning, God intended to bring people from every corner of creation into his family.

Every Sunday, we see some of that plan unfolding here in this room!

But many other people have not heard the good news of the gospel yet.

We have the joyous privilege of being gospel messengers to a world full of confusion and pain.

Listen to how Paul describes the urgency of our mission, in Romans 10:14-15.

14 "But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him?

And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him?

And how can they hear about him unless someone tells them?

15 And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent?

That is why the Scriptures say, "How beautiful are the feet of messengers who bring good news!"

The simple act of worshipping together, as brothers and sisters from all nations, is a gospel proclamation.

We give people a sample, a little taste of what worship will be like in heaven.

Thank you for singing with joy and gladness every week.

In conclusion, I will summarize what Psalms 96 teaches us about prayer.

When we pray, we speak to God, we speak to ourselves, and we also speak to one another.

We address our prayers to God, of course.

But our hearts are listening when we pray, and we also encourage one another.

Now let's conclude this sermon by reading verses 1 to 3 together.

Please stand and read with me, from Psalm 96:1-3, with joyful hearts!

1 Sing to the Lord a new song;

 sing to the Lord, all the earth.

2 Sing to the Lord, praise his name;

 proclaim his salvation day after day.

3 Declare his glory among the nations,

 his marvelous deeds among all peoples!

God in Heaven, we are gathered here in this small space, a humble room, full of sinful people.

However, when we worship you, our souls shine with the glory and goodness of Christ who lives within us.

Thank you that we will worship you face-to-face for eternity.

Thank you that people of every nation, tribe, and language will worship there together.

For these things we sing to you and praise your name, through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.