

Summer in the Psalms: Exploring the “with God” Life Psalm 96

This psalm is one that would be considered a “royal psalm”, along with psalms 93-99, that celebrated and praised God as Israel’s king, and was sung and/or recited on the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles. It’s ironic that there would be psalms that recognized God as Israel’s king because the very fact that Israel had a monarchy was, from God’s point of view, a rejection of Him as their king (see I Samuel 8:7). Shrewdly, however, God would end up using even their rejection of Him to bring to fruition His plan of bringing a redeemer, savior, messiah to them and to the world by using the royal line of David, out of which Jesus would ultimately come.

The crux of this psalm is verse 10; “*Say among the nations, ‘The Lord reigns.’*” Every part of this psalm revolves around that core thought and reality. This psalm could also be considered a “missiological” psalm because it states clearly Israel’s calling, vocation, mission...that being of letting the nations (all people groups, ethnicities, races, tribes, tongues, etc.) know who the rightful (as well as reigning and ruling) God is. This has always been the purpose of God’s people, be it Israel in the past, or the Church presently. We are to let people know about our God, who He is, what He’s like, what He’s done, what He will do. So, what does this psalm have to say in regards to that?

He is great and to be feared (verse 4). Why? He made the heavens (verse 5), He firmly established the world (verse 10), He will judge the peoples—understood as all the earth’s human inhabitants, regardless of how you’d like to group them, (verses 10, 13). What is He like? Notice the words used to describe Him—glory, strength, majesty, splendor, holiness, righteous, truth.

Of course, it’s easy for people to use fancy words to describe their deity, talk is cheap after all. But Israel has a long history of God’s “marvelous deeds” that they could point to in order to back up their claims. Likewise, the Church also has God’s actions throughout history to point to. The BIG events that Israel could/would point to would be their deliverance from slavery in Egypt (the exodus) and all that went into establishing them as a nation, including the conquest and inhabiting the Promised Land. For the Church, the BIG events that we point to are the life, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension of Jesus, and the establishment and spread of the Church across the globe. All of this points to a BIG God, with a BIG purpose, who is worthy of BIG praise, honor, worship, and loyalty.

(Side note: It is important to remember when reading the psalms that they are poetic in nature. Meaning that we need to be careful not to take them too literally. For example, when the psalm speaks of trees of the forest singing, or the sea resounding, or fields being jubilant (see verses 11-12) the psalmist is trying to communicate the widespread, all-encompassing nature of celebration that the reality of the Lord reigning brings. The Bible is full of such imagery, and it is important to understand what is literal and what is figurative, metaphoric, symbolic, etc. More importantly, to say that something is not “literal” DOES NOT mean that it is any less inspired or

important, or authoritative, or reliable. It's simply recognizing the genre in which it was written. Which really adds to the Bible's beauty, texture, and brilliance.)

Now there is something to be careful of here. When we talk about God's reign and rule, of His greatness, of Him being greater than all supposed "gods" (all of which is true, of course), we want to be cautious of taking on a tone or demeanor that comes off cocky and arrogant—sort of like "my dad can beat up your dad." (or in this case, my God can beat up your god). As true as that might be, we want to be careful to communicate that God is great...we are not. Just like Israel, we didn't do anything great. Everything God has ever done in history—for Israel, for the Church, for anyone—is by grace. So, there's never a place for an uppity attitude. Though His greatness, and His faithfulness, favor, and goodness toward us should fill us with confidence and security. There's a fine line between confidence and arrogance.

Another important point to grapple with from this psalm is that it does not do us (or anyone else) any good to proclaim to whoever will listen that the Lord reigns, if we do not live consistent to that reality. A good way to think about it is: the love and lordship of Jesus touches/affects every possible part of human existence. His love and lordship has something to say about every facet of our lives. Our role and goal, then, is to work out the implications of His love and lordship in our lives, personally and collectively. To not work out the implications and to not live consistently with that reality both dishonors God and makes it all the harder for others to believe such a message.

Working out the implications of Jesus' reign means that all issues (political, social, economic, etc.) are affected by that ultimate reality. So, when we consider various issues—immigration, healthcare, education, sexuality, race, finer points of theology, etc.—His Lordship needs to inform our understanding. But, and this is a big BUT, we don't always agree. Then what? Well, the natural human tendency is to disassociate with those who disagree with us. But loving one another is one of the chief commands. (And obeying His commands is a part and parcel of recognizing His reign and rule.) He didn't say to love each other only when we agree with one another. So a major implication of His Lordship is that we figure out how to stay lovingly unity even amongst vehement disagreement of various issues. His Lordship is our rallying point...not our agreement on lesser issues. To disassociate/divide over differing opinions is to step into the role of judge. This psalm clear states that it is HIS role to judge...not ours. (Again, this is all part of working out the implications of His Lordship.)

When we come together as the church, we celebrate His love and lordship, and we flesh out the implications of it in our time and place. This is tough and on-going work. Thankfully, we have the Scriptures, the Spirit, and each other to aid us in this ongoing endeavor. The reason it is so important for us to do this, (and this really ought to be the heartbeat of our lives), is because we were made to reign with Christ. God created humans in the first place to rule over His creation with Him (see Genesis 1:28). And though we became corrupt, God has been working ever since to bring about His original intent. So we were designed to rule with Him, we are destined to rule with Him (see Revelation 2:26-27)...and in the meantime we are in the

process of learning how to do just that (we often call this process “discipleship”). This is a HUGE part of the WITH GOD life.

- Q. What do you celebrate? (What sort of occasions, events, people, accomplishments, etc. do you/we celebrate?) How do you celebrate? What’s your favorite way to celebrate?**
- Q. When you hear the statement “The Lord reigns!” what do you think and feel?**
- Q. We could consider/describe “growth” or “maturity” as coming to a deeper understanding of the implications of Jesus’ reign and living in more consistent harmony with those implications. In that light, describe how you’ve “grown” over the past year (or two years, or five years).**
- Q. What do you think about the idea that we were made to reign and rule with Jesus? How does that idea jive with your understanding of the Christian faith/life?**
- Q. If we are made to reign and rule with Christ (and we are), how do we prepare ourselves for such a task?**
- Q. As a group, if you feel up to it, pick an issue of the day to discuss that will likely bring in differences of opinions. Commit to extending love, out of the recognition of the Lordship of Jesus, despite whatever differences in opinions might exist. Commit to agreeing to disagree if necessary, but commit to not allowing love to wane in the process. (Do not fear disagreement. Remember, the WITH GOD life dismantles fear, and gives us a foundation to love. And a big part of love is respectfully listening to another person’s point of view...and maybe even learning from it.)**
- Q. Practically/logistically speaking, how can we go about proclaiming to the nations/peoples that Jesus reigns?**
- Q. We’ve looked at several psalms over the past 6 weeks. Has a “favorite” jumped out to you...one that has really spoken to you?**
- Q. What word, line, phrase or stanza stands out to you from Psalm 96 (or for that matter, any Psalm from this week in the devotional guide?) Is there any part of this psalm that you particularly like, or that particularly disturbs you?**