

Imagination and Worship

Psalm 96

Turn to Psalm 96 please. The composer of Psalm 96 has discovered what God is really like. Don't know if it's a recent discovery, or if the psalmist has known this a long time. Either way, the composer has a clear picture of God, and wants us the worshippers to respond in a way that fits who God is.

My Journey of Understanding Worship Songs

In my teenage years I rarely found singing songs to God to be meaningful or satisfying. I did not connect with God in songs, although I did elsewhere. Some were fun to sing, but not much more than that.

Somewhere in my 20s that changed, and more and more I experienced singing songs to God as meaningful and satisfying. I was glad for the change, and that I had genuine joy in singing to the Lord. Some people don't ever really connect with the music part of worship, and that's fine too. We're all different. There are other ways to worship God. I began to enjoy this more.

Then I heard someone say that the purpose of singing was not that WE would find praising God meaningful and satisfying, but that GOD would find our worship meaningful and satisfying. We are not the audience, God is the audience. The real question is not: do we enjoy this? The real question is: does God enjoy this? Is this satisfying to him?

That made sense to me. We are before God, and we are singing to him. We know from Scripture that not all worship pleased him. It is not wrong that we enjoy worship and find it satisfying, it is not immature, it is good, the psalms themselves speak of that experience.

But the real purpose of worship is not our pleasure, it is that God would be pleased. We can please God even if we are not pleased, and I found that freeing, though I still usually enjoy singing songs to God.

The next stage I think I heard first from Henry Schellenberg, the choir director at Providence for many years. He said to me more or less in these words:

“We're not doing God a favour by worshipping him. How can we *not* worship? Given who God is, worship is the only fitting response. Our God is so glorious and majestic, and so gracious and faithful, that if we do *not* worship him heart and soul, we are either spiritually blind, or we are his enemies. In front of God, we can do nothing else, worship is the only right and natural thing to do.”

I was a bit stunned to hear this, to be honest with you. But it's the truth, and once you try it on I think it will grow on you. We have to think a little more about God himself to make sense of this. This is certainly the view of Revelation. Revelation has more songs to God than the rest of the NT put together, it is the closest thing the NT has to the book of Psalms. Revelation has much praise to God right in front of him, and they can do nothing else.

Psalm 96 comes deeply from that way of thinking. The composer of Psalm 96 has discovered what God is really like, and wants us the worshippers to respond to God in a way that fits the God we have.

Psalm 96 has four stanzas, and we'll go through it that way.

Stanza one: sing, sing, sing (96:1-3)

*Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.*

<sup>2</sup> *Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.*

<sup>3</sup> *Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples.*

This first stanza has six imperatives. This is common in worship psalms. Sing to the LORD, sing to the LORD, sing to the LORD, praise his name, proclaim his salvation, declare his glory

When we see something striking or unusual, something incredible or amazing, we can hardly keep silent. We want to tell people who did not see it, we want to talk about it with people who did see it. It is a natural response; we would find it nearly impossible to be silent.

What Psalm 96 tells us about God is that if we could see him as he is, and grasp all things he has done, this is what we would do, it would be a natural response, we would find it nearly impossible to be silent. We would sing to the LORD, sing to the LORD, sing to the LORD, we'd praise his name, proclaim his salvation, and declare his glory.

Imagine what kind of God would it take for you to see him in all his majesty, and grasp all the things he has done, and then you would find it basically impossible NOT to: Sing, sing, sing, praise, proclaim his salvation, and declare his glory.

What kind of a God would it take to bring you and me to that place today, right now? The composer of Psalm 96 has discovered what God is really like. Whatever kind of God it would take to make you and me want to sing and praise and declare his glory, that's the God that the composer has discovered, that's the God that Psalm 96 sees. That God is enthroned right now while we meet in this room.

Psalm 96 is not asking us to see this God. It tells us that our God is like this, and since our God is like this, let's respond to him the right way. Let's sing and praise and declare his glory.

Stanza two: why we sing and praise (96:4-6)

In the psalms we're never just told to worship God, we are always given reasons. The first stanza had six worship imperatives, the second stanza has none, because it tells us *why* it makes sense to worship. We worship with our mouths, and also with our minds.

Love God with your mind, not just your heart. There are reasons to praise God, so let's think about them. Use your imagination.

<sup>4</sup> *For great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.*

<sup>5</sup> *For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.*

<sup>6</sup> *Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.*

There are two kinds of reasons for praise through this psalm. One is God's splendor and majesty and glory. Here especially we need to imagine what it would be like to see God as he is, the kind of vision John had which we read about in Revelation 4.

The sun has splendor and majesty, not because it has a light show going on behind it, or it has fancy clothes and an impressive throne. No, not at all; rather, light and heat and energy just pour out of the sun all the time. God's glory and splendor are like that.

The sun is too bright to stare at directly for more than a moment. God's glory and splendor are such that if we saw this we would not survive. If we could see and survive, we would sing, sing, sing, praise, proclaim, declare.

So glory and splendor and majesty are one kind of reason to praise God, and the other is his strength: he made the heavens. He made our magnificent sun. He also made millions of other suns, some lesser and many greater. How much light and life and energy comes out from God?

Imagine being in front of a God like this, and we can tell from what God looks like, and what it feels like to be in his presence, that he has this kind of strength and power.

Let's say to ourselves, "If I could be there, and survive the presence of a God like that, it would be the most natural thing in the world for me to sing and praise him with all my heart and soul." Because, you see, this is the very God we approach, every time we gather together.

Our God is like this right now. He was there when you walked into this room, and he will be there just like this when you leave. We are gathered now in his Presence. The problem is not that we are here and he is there. The problem is that we are all in front of him but blindfolded. We do not ask God to show up here. We need to make sure we show up there.

This psalm does not tell us to get rid of the blindfolds. We cannot do that. This psalm tells us we are in front of that God, blindfold or not, so let's act like it. Let's give him his due.

Stanza three: Recognize the LORD (96:7-10)

The third stanza is similar to the first. It is full of worship imperatives. The first stanza began with “sing to the LORD” repeated three times. This stanza has “ascribe to the LORD,” also repeated three times.

We could translate it “give the LORD his due” or “give the LORD what he deserves, all you families of nations, acknowledge the LORD’s glory and strength, give the LORD credit for the glory of his name.”

<sup>7</sup> *Ascribe to the LORD, all you families of nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.*

<sup>9</sup> *Worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.*

<sup>10</sup> *Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns.”*

*The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.*

V8 *Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts.* Give the LORD the glory due his name, bring an offering and come into his courts. Three imperatives: ascribe, bring, and come.

When we come to church, let’s bring a gift. Every time we meet on the Lord’s Day, let’s each of us bring a gift to our God. Let’s give him the glory due his name. Let’s treat him as he deserves. Bring an offering and come into his courts. Show up, and show up prepared.

The NT is clear that the people of God, the gathering of God, is the new temple, the new dwelling of God. When we gather to worship, we certainly come into his courts.

In the ancient world, no one ever appeared before a king without a gift. In 1 Samuel, King Saul told David’s father Jesse, that King Saul wanted David in his service. So Jesse sent David to King Saul, and he also sent gifts: some bread, some wine, and a young goat, so that David could give the king gifts. Heads of state still receive gifts. Bring God a gift, every Sunday.

God says a few times in the OT that no one should come before me emptyhanded (Exodus 23:15; 34:20; Deuteronomy 16:16). There are a few ways to do this. One practical way is to divide up what you put in the offering so that you have some every week. It won’t be a big gift, but the habit reminds you that you’re coming to worship your king, and you’ve come with a gift.

Or you can say to yourself, today my gift will be to thank God and to praise God. I will come to God with thanks and praise. Hebrews 13 speaks of this. The central thing is, we come into the sanctuary to *give* something to God. Let’s not just come here to receive from God. Let’s also come with a gift for God.

Romans 12:1 says present your bodies as a living gift to God, the only proper worship. Make a point of saying to God, “I am yours, God, I give myself to you, use me however you want.” And that would be your gift. *Give the LORD the glory due his name, bring an offering and come into his courts.*

We sometimes say “come to God just as we are.” I’m nervous about this. Don’t stay away because you think you have no gift, or because you can’t really honour God on that day. God is gracious, by all means come.

But remember this God that we stand before. You know about him. Let’s give God evidence that we honour and respect him. If we believe that the composer of Psalm 96 has discovered what God is really like, that will shape how we come here into his presence. *Give the LORD the glory due his name, bring an offering, and come into his courts.*

#### Stanza four: Rejoice for the LORD is Coming! (96:11-13)

In this psalm we’ve heard about worship and praise and giving glory, but nothing yet about joy or gladness. But the fourth stanza explodes with joy.

<sup>11</sup> *Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it.*

<sup>12</sup> *Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.*

<sup>13</sup> *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.*

Verse 11 and 12 have seven different celebrators: the heavens, the earth, the sea, all that’s in the sea, the fields, everything in the fields, and the trees of the forest. Verse 13 sums it up – let all creation rejoice before the LORD.

Why? Real simple: the LORD is coming, he’s coming to judge the earth, which means he’s coming to make things right and to rule that way.

All of creation is having a party, because God is coming. What kind of God would our God be, if when the stars and planets see him coming, *they* begin to celebrate and dance around? What kind of God do we have, that the *oceans* would cheer and clap when they see him coming?

The fields are jubilant. Think about fields, many fields around here. These Manitoba fields are jubilant. The trees of the forest sing for joy, all because they see our God coming to earth. This is the future day of the LORD, we still have not seen this, but when creation sees our God coming there is a worldwide explosion of joy.

The composer of Psalm 96 has discovered what God is really like. If we could see God as he is, and experience what he is like and what he has done and will do, we would sing and give him glory, just as creation already does.

What kind of a God do we have, that all the responses of Psalm 96 make perfect sense, that in his presence there is no other way to act than to sing and give glory and celebrate? Use your imagination.

PRAYER: O LORD our God, we praise your name. You are great and most worthy of praise. Splendor and majesty are before you, strength and glory are in your sanctuary. We give you the glory that is due your name. We are in your presence, and we bring you the gift of thanksgiving and praise. You have saved us, and made us your people, and we thank you. This is the best thing that could possibly happen to anyone. We give your ourselves, we make our bodies a living offering to you. Take us and use us for your glory. And knowing that you will come back to this earth makes us cheer. We want you to come, O LORD our God, come to this earth. We will greet you with songs of joy. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the Lord direct our hearts into God's love and Christ's perseverance. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.