

# Learning to Worship, Part 2

## Psalm 96:1-13

**Series:** Exalt the LORD our God – Fall 2021

**Preaching Date:** October 17, 2021

**Worship:** Glory Will Cover the Earth

**Key Sentence:** True worship is almost entirely focused on God, not me.

**Outline:**

- I. Rehearse His salvation (Psalm 96:1-3)
- II. Recognize His Greatness (Psalm 96:4-6)
- III. Ascribe to Him Glory (Psalm 96:7-9)
- IV. Anticipate His Return (Psalm 96:10-13)

**Psalm 96:1–13** Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth!

<sup>2</sup>Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. <sup>3</sup>Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!

<sup>4</sup>For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods.

<sup>5</sup>For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens. <sup>6</sup>Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

<sup>7</sup>Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, 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 holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!

<sup>10</sup>Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.” <sup>11</sup>Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; <sup>12</sup>let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy <sup>13</sup>before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.

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### Psalm 96:1-13

In 2004 a group of us went to Moscow to help with English camp for Russian high schoolers. While on the trip some of us also visited St. Petersburg and went to the Hermitage, the world's largest art museum, stretching for almost a mile along the Neva River. Room 254 is Dutch painters and features *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Rembrandt, about which whole books have been written.

So, imagine you're standing in front of *The Return of the Prodigal Son* taking in the details, the technique, the use of the light, and thinking about the symbolism and the story. Except you've got jet lag and you're tired so it's a bit hard to concentrate. Also you're trying to keep track of your group, and they keep disappearing into other rooms. And they're being noisy, so that the babushka in the corner, the museum rule enforcer, is starting to give you the evil eye. But you keep trying to wrench your attention back to this painting, probably the only time you'll ever see it. Then another visitor at the museum walks up and comments in British English "beautiful, isn't it?" "Yes," you comment and turn your gaze back. He asks "You're American, aren't you?" You answer, he asks why you're here, which is a long story and you find yourself talking about yourself and your experiences and him, and his background, and before you know it twenty minutes have passed and your group has moved on and you haven't gotten to contemplate Rembrandt's masterpiece at all.

I'm afraid this is, too often, our experience of the Christian life. We long to put our attention on the master, on God. We long to see his beauty, his technique, his character, his greatness and glory. But we're so tied up in the rest of our lives that when we approach him, we're tired. Or we're distracted. There are a million things that are not God vying for our attention. Or we're preoccupied with ourselves and others. We think we've come into his presence but we spend more time with others than with him, or mostly telling him our story and our concerns, so that we don't actually focus on him.

In other words, we're not very good at worship. Last week we looked at Psalm 95, which was mostly about how we worship, with our voices, our bodies, our hearts and our minds. This week's Psalm, 96, also about worship, is focused more on who we worship. This Psalm models for us a key truth: true worship is almost entirely focused on God, not me. In this Psalm we'll see the psalmist modeling true worship as he remembers God's salvation, recognizes His greatness, ascribes to him glory and joyfully anticipates his ultimate rescue.

We begin with Psalm 96:1-3 *Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! <sup>2</sup>Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day. <sup>3</sup>Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!*

In Psalm 95 we saw the phrase “let us.” Let us sing. Let us worship. Let us make a joyful noise. These were called jussives, not fully a command, but exhorting one another to act. Here though, it’s a true command. Sing to the Lord; sing to the Lord; sing to the Lord. First, “sing to the LORD a new song.” Kidner says “The new song is not simply a piece newly composed, but a response that will match the freshness of his mercies, ‘new every morning.’” Lamentations 3:22 “His mercies never come to an end; <sup>23</sup>they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” If God’s mercies are newly granted to us every day, our response to them should be new and fresh every day. We’re less than a verse into the psalm, but already we have an application: preach the good news to yourself every day. Remind yourself of the awfulness of sin and the greatness of salvation, the brokenness of the world and the greatness of its restoration, your own weakness and the great love of the sacrificed savior. Sing it anew, rehearse it afresh, preach the good news to yourself every day.

Second, “sing to the LORD, all the earth.” Though the psalms were the worship book of Israel, the psalmists have their eyes on the whole earth. Psalm 24 “The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” Here the whole created world and everyone in it is commanded to sing. By the way, beginning here this whole psalm is quoted in 1<sup>st</sup> Chronicles 16 where David brought the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem and “first appointed that thanksgiving be sung to the LORD by Asaph and his brothers.” This Psalm seems to have been extracted from the songs written for that occasion.

Third, “Sing to the LORD, bless his name.” Here the psalm begins to turn a corner. It’s not so much about how we worship but who we worship, the LORD. To bless his name, of course, is to bless his character, his attributes, his being, his works, which is where the psalmist goes next. “Tell of his salvation from day to day.” When the Hebrew Old Testament was put into Greek, the translators chose the verb “euangelizo,” for this telling. Euangelizo is the root of our word “evangelize,” thus “tell the good news of his salvation from day to day.” Earlier I recommended telling yourself the good news new every morning. This takes it further. The whole earth deserves to hear of his salvation, which includes all his acts of redemption and rescue, but which especially points to Jesus whom the Father sent to be the savior of the world and who was called by the name Jesus, literally salvation, for he saved his people from their sins.

Therefore, verse 3, we are commanded to “declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!” When I was twenty years old, in 1976 I attended the Intervarsity Urbana missionary conference. It was entitled “Declare His Glory Among the Nations.” Like so many others, I made a commitment to declare his glory, not only in my own nation, but, as God permitted, to others as well. Most of my declaring, of course, has been right here, and I hope there are not many weeks when I don’t ask God to reveal his glory through our services. I’ve also had opportunities, in Slovakia and Russia most obviously, to declare his glory on the other side of the world. But we live in Houston, one of the most diverse cities on the planet. We all have the opportunity to declare his glory to people from almost every tribe and nation. Chinese have come here. Vietnamese have come here. Nepalis have come here. Venezuelans have come here. Kenyans have come here. Many ethnic groups find homes and kin in the Houston area. And currently a big fraction of the refugees from Afghanistan are coming here. Are we looking for ways to declare his glory among these nations at our doorstep? I hope we are. I recently got in touch with a church planter who is working among Afghans in southwest Houston. I’m hoping Trinity can partner with him in some way.

All of this is worship, and it is not for no reason. We noticed last week that the how of worship was linked to the who of worship by the word “for.” That’s even more true this week. We’ve seen that we rehearse and declare the good news of salvation in Jesus. Next we’ll see that it’s because of his greatness and other attributes that belong only to God. Psalm 96:4-6 *For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. <sup>5</sup>For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens. <sup>6</sup>Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.*

“Great is the LORD.” The word great is almost as common in Hebrew as in English and has somewhat the same range of meaning. The difference may be that in English we overuse the word. “How was your day?” “It was great” “These tacos are great.” We use it sarcastically. “How are you enjoying the COVID.” “Oh, it’s great.” Hebrew uses it more for size than we do. “You shall not have in your bag two weights, a great and a small.” Hebrew also uses it to describe the superiority of the works of the LORD. In Deuteronomy it is used of the great wonders he performed in the plagues and the rescue from Egypt. In Jeremiah it’s “Ah, Lord GOD! It is you who have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and by your outstretched arm! Nothing is too hard for you.” When we say the LORD is great we mean that his great power has allowed him to do great works. In particular the book of Hebrews urges us not to neglect the great salvation that we have been given through Jesus Christ.

“Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised.” This just follows. If God is God then he is worthy to be praised, and if God is great, then he is worthy to be greatly praised. The key to this is that God is not like us. He does not seek our praise because of his own vanity, his need for a compliment or a desire to put us in our place. Rather, it is out of love that he offers us this privilege of praise. As C. S. Lewis said “all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. . . . Praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. . . . I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.”

God is greatly to be praised and “he is to be feared above all gods.” We saw last week that when God is compared with “gods,” this is not because such gods actually exist, but “this is the language of hymnic praise, in which the ‘gods’ are contemptible fictions of the imaginations of man.” Verse 5: “For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols, but the LORD made the heavens.” I think there are two kinds of idols, those we set up for ourselves and worship through the fallenness of our human nature, and those backed up by demons, so that they have demonic power in the lives of those who follow them. But this verse makes a mockery of both kinds. Kidner says “the Old Testament treats [this word] as a mere parody of elohim, God. It is translated ‘worthless.’ In Job, ‘worthless physicians.’ In Jeremiah, ‘worthless divination.’” “This robust challenge to the accepted ideas of the day invites the Christian to be equally unimpressed by currently revered nonsense.” Rather, we are to fear and reverence and reverently obey the true God.

“The gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.” The work that Doug Rask does, week after week to show the reasonableness of creation by God and the bankruptcy of other approaches is important, because Scripture calls us time after time to trust in the one who had the power to create.

Verse 6 “Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.” This is pure praise. True worship is focused on God, not me. This is that. It’s the worshipper picturing God surrounded in his holy place with his perfect qualities. The first one, splendor, is associated with beauty, with the divine appearance of God. The second one, majesty, is associated with his kingly behavior. He who is divinely beautiful is also perfect in how he reigns. The third, strength, is power, might, his ability to carry out his sovereign will. And the fourth is again, beauty. In this case the word is sometimes used of a beautiful woman or a beautiful crown, yet it is also used of the glory of God and even his crown. Notice the parallelism: the first and fourth are associated with divine beauty, the second and third with divine sovereignty.

We've seen so far that in worship we rehearse and remember God's salvation, and we recognize His greatness, his majesty, his strength. Our focus in worship is not on us, but it is on God. The third section of Psalm 96 calls us to affirm that all glory belongs to him. Psalm 96:7-9 *Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, 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 holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!*

“Ascribe” is a great word, not too common in spoken English. The dictionary uses words like “attribute to” or “impute to,” and says “to think of as belonging to someone as a quality or characteristic.” One of the dictionaries had a sample sentence that I think brings out the meaning pretty well “They ascribed courage to me for something I did out of sheer panic.” You always ascribe something to someone and in these Biblical uses, it's usually recognizing in God one of the character qualities that he has. In this sense it's a great and unique worship word. How do you worship? By voicing your recognition of a character quality of God's, which he has whether you recognize it or not.

So “Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength!” Notice again that this worship is to come from all the peoples, families of nations, multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. In this verse two qualities of God are being recognized. The first is his glory, the glory due his name. My long-held definition of glory is the radiance that shines from every perfect character quality of God. Ascribing to him glory is saying “all your character qualities are perfect. Everything about you is perfect. Your very being radiates this perfection. I recognize that.” Do you? Do I? Our culture keeps pushing on us to dwell on questions about God. Is he really good? Is he really just? Is he really loving? Is his word really trustworthy? Is he really able to do what he promises? These may be important questions, but when they dominate our thinking then we fail to ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name, because we're not able to trust that everything about him is gloriously perfect.

The second character quality mentioned is strength. Ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. This is a great combination. All his qualities are perfect: his love, his mercy, his justice, his wisdom. And he's strong enough, in every way and every realm, to put his perfect qualities into effect wherever they are needed.

Just as the earlier command to sing was repeated three times with increasing amplification, so the command to ascribe is repeated three times with increasing amplification, topped off by the next phrase “bring an offering, and come into his courts!”

This adds a great practical application to this Godward focus of worship. Bring an offering. Don't think worship is something you can offer lightly and at no cost. True worship, as we heard from Paul in Romans 12 last week involves laying down your own life and seeking to do God's perfect will. There is a story at the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel where King David goes up to Jerusalem, his future capital and wants to make an offering to atone for his sin in numbering the people. A man there has a threshing floor and oxen threshing the grain. He wants to give these to David for his offering. But David says "No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing." In the same way we should not offer worship that costs us nothing. True worship brings to God not only our money, but our time, our energy, maybe even our pride and our dignity. Bring an offering.

Verse 9 "Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth!" The question that always occurs to me is "whose holiness?" Worship in the splendor of your holiness, or worship in the splendor of his. Turns out I'm not the only one to ask the question. The Theological Wordbook points out that this same word was used in verse 6, though translated majesty, to describe the Lord in his sanctuary. After a long discussion they conclude that "the major emphasis is on the Lord and his appearance, not on the worshipper except as the realization of God's actual presence evokes awe. A translation could be: 'prostrate yourselves before the Lord when he appears in holiness.'"

We've seen all kinds of true worship expressed by focusing on God, praising what we see: his salvation, his greatness, his splendor and majesty, his glory. The final section is a bit different because it focuses on the worship all creation will offer when God finally comes to rescue and judge the earth. Verses 10-13 *Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns! Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity."* <sup>11</sup>*Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; <sup>12</sup>let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy <sup>13</sup>before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.*

"Say among the nations, 'The LORD reigns!'" We've already been encouraged in this psalm to tell the good news of salvation to all peoples and to declare His glory among the nations. This third exhortation is meant to reassure the nations that God is on the throne of the universe, worthy of worship not only by men, but by all of creation. He has established his reign by his power as creator and by his righteousness as judge: "Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity."

These are truths about God that are worthy of our worship, but this is also a promise of day to come when His reign will be fully established. Kidner says “The decisiveness of the Hebrew verb and the exultant response in verses 11 and 12 point to a new and overwhelming assertion of sovereignty. They announce God’s advent, the Day of the Lord.” Verse 10 is more about government, God’s reign, than it is about cosmology. For many years flat-earthers and other outlier groups have used this phrase, “the world is established, it cannot be moved” to argue against the revolution of the earth and the Copernican model of the solar system. But that’s not what this psalm is about.

“He will come.” His coming and even his judgment is an occasion for joyful focused-on-God worship. Next week’s psalm, Psalm 97, will show us that his coming is an awesome spectacle that brings dismay to the unrighteous but delight to God’s people. This week, just delight. Verse 11 “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; <sup>12</sup>let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy <sup>13</sup>before the LORD.” That in some sense all creation worships God is a common theme. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem the Pharisees said, “Teacher, rebuke your disciples.” He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” Creation worships. Isaiah 49:13 “Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing!” Creation worships, looking forward to his final coming and restoration. Isaiah 55 “You shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. <sup>13</sup>Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign.”

Notice the contrasts in our verses, which make it clear that this is a description of all creation. “Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice.” Heavens and earth. “Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; <sup>12</sup>let the field exult, and everything in it!” Sea and dry land. All of creation rejoices and worships before God who has come to restore all things. The Psalmist caps it by saying “then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the LORD.” I loved this image and used it for the visual image this week. You can just imagine the trees lifting themselves toward the sky and singing for joy in the presence of God. They clap their hands, or their branches. We don’t see this behavior by trees today, and it might not be visible behavior even on the Day of the Lord, but the witness of Scripture lets us know that on some level suitable to their nature, all the elements of creation are going to rejoice and worship in that Day.

Paul tells us in Romans 8 that “creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. <sup>20</sup>For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly,

but because of him who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup>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.” Notice that this freeing of creation in bondage is totally tied to the work of redemption that Jesus has done and will do for us. This is confirmed by the last verse. Verse 13 “for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness.” Next week we’ll see a bit of the dismay of judgment. The judgment of those who have never come to Christ by faith will be retributive. People will get what they deserve. But the judgment pictured here looks forward to his coming because all that is wrong will be made right.

So what have we seen. Worship is focused on God. This Psalm has modeled that kind of worship, worship that rehearses his salvation, that recognizes his greatness, his splendor, his majesty, and worship that ascribes or assigns to him alone the glory that is due him. Finally, this kind of God-focused worship rejoices to anticipate his return bringing righteousness. All this reminds me of the moment in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Mr. and Mrs. Beaver are introducing the children to the concept of Aslan. Edmund has already betrayed the other children, Peter, Susan and Lucy, and they have tried to think of a way to rescue him, but Mr. Beaver says “It’s no good your trying. But now that Aslan is on the move-” “Who is Aslan?” asked Susan.

“Aslan?” said Mr Beaver. “Why, don’t you know? He’s the King. He’s the Lord of the whole wood, but not often here, you understand. Never in my time or my father’s time. But the word has reached us that he has come back. He is in Narnia at this moment. He’ll settle the White Queen all right.” “She won’t turn him into stone too?” said Edmund. “Lord love you, Son of Adam, what a simple thing to say!” answered Mr Beaver. “Turn him into stone? If she can stand on her two feet and look him in the face it’ll be the most she can do and more than I expect of her. No, no. He’ll put all to rights as it says in an old rhyme in these parts: Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight, At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more, When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death, And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.”

Psalm 96, and next week, Psalm 97, is the old rhyme that tells “wrong will be right and sorrows will be no more, and winter will meet its death. When the Lion of the Tribe of Judah shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.” Until then, we focus our worship on this rescuing God, not on ourselves.