

The God We Worship

Psalm 97

Series: Psalms / Thoughts on Worship

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Worship has become a prominent issue in our day. Many books are being written on worship and worship renewal. Many churches are struggling with worship, searching for ways to improve and bring life to their services, trying new methods, new styles of music, new formats and new meeting times. All of the difficulties and debates over worship are, I believe, symptoms of a greater problem. If I could identify one primary cause that lies at the root of much of the turmoil that has been stirred up concerning worship, it would be a **lack of knowledge of the one true God of Scripture**.

Our greatest need in worship is to know God.

Worship is not a secondary subject. It is not something that is casual or optional or an add-on. It's comprehensive. It's at the core of who we are as Christians. It describes our connection and interaction with God.

- We worship God in all of life as we present our bodies a living sacrifice (Romans 1:1–2).
- We worship God in times of private devotion as we pray and read His Word and meditate.
- We worship God in times of family worship as we read the Bible and pray with our families.
- And we worship God in times of corporate worship when we come together with God's people to glorify Him and honor Him.

Worship is all about knowing and serving and communing with the one true God by faith alone in the provision He has made for us to draw near to Him by the Person and work of Jesus Christ. It is acknowledging God's presence, expressing our love and devotion to Him and submitting our lives to His Word.

So why do we struggle with worship?

Our difficulty lies in that we too often make worship more about ourselves than about God. We focus too much on the externals and not enough on the heart. We look for ways to satisfy our wants, our desires and our felt needs. Churches sense a lack of life and participation in their services and so they try many different ways to improve and revive their worship—new methods, new meeting times, new formats, new styles of music—old styles of music. But changing the dressing isn't our greatest need.

If our worship is to be vital and alive, and not just observing customs and going through motions, we need most of all to know the one true God of Scripture. We must know Him personally and trust Him for life and for salvation. And we must know Him rightly—as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word.

If we are to come and rightly give God the worship He is due, it is essential that we know Him:

- Know His character, His attributes
- Know His acts, His power
- Know His promises, His plan of redemption and rescue
- Know His commandments, His will—His Word!

It is essential that we really grasp something of who God is—not as we imagine Him to be, but as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word.

Open your Bibles tonight to Psalm 97. In Psalm 97 we are reminded in vivid terms of who this God is that we come to worship. We will consider this psalm tonight in two parts:

The first half of the psalm (verses 1 to 6) give us a wonderful description of God as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word.

The second half of the psalm (verses 7 to 12) shows us the results of this knowledge of God: its impact both on those who **are not looking to God**, but trusting in other things; and its impact on those who **are looking to God** and trusting in Him alone.

Let's begin by reading the psalm together.

Psalms 97:1	The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!
2	Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
3	Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around.
4	His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles.
5	The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth.

6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness,
 and all the peoples see his glory.

Psalms 97:7 All worshipers of images are put to shame,
 who make their boast in worthless idols;
 worship him, all you gods!

Psalms 97:8 Zion hears and is glad,
 and the daughters of Judah rejoice,
 because of your judgments, O LORD.

9 For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth;
 you are exalted far above all gods.

10 O you who love the LORD, hate evil!
 He preserves the lives of his saints;
 he delivers them from the hand of the wicked.

11 Light is sown for the righteous,
 and joy for the upright in heart.

12 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous,
 and give thanks to his holy name!

In the first half of the psalm we have a glorious description of our God as Sovereign over His creation. The psalmist begins:

Psalms 97:1 The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice;
 let the many coastlands be glad!

This is one of three evangelistic psalms that open with this theme: “The Lord reigns!” The other two are Psalm 93 and 99. These psalms fulfill the command given in Psalm 96:10, where we are told: “Say among the nations, “The Lord reigns!”

The glorious truth of God’s sovereignty must be proclaimed to everyone. The “many coastlands” here refers to those who dwell on every shore. In every nation—everywhere and every land where there is breath and human life, we are to make the truth about God known.

God’s sovereignty extends over all His creation. This is an essential part of sharing the gospel with unbelievers. We must “Say among the nations, “The Lord reigns!”

The theme of God’s reign over His creation is found numerous times in Scripture.

Psalm 146 closes with the theme:

Psalms 146:10 The LORD will reign forever,
 your God, O Zion, to all generations.
 Praise the LORD!

This, in fact, is a glorious subject that we will be singing about for ages to come. It is a major theme of worship in heaven. The last song whose text is recorded in Scripture, the Alleluia in Revelation 19:6, is a song of celebration sung by the church now glorified in heaven.

Revelation 19:6 Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out,
 "Hallelujah!
 For the Lord our God
 the Almighty reigns.
7 Let us rejoice and exult
 and give him the glory,
 for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
 and his Bride has made herself ready.

The psalmist continues in the next five verses of Psalm 97 telling us more about God:

Psalms 97:2 Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;
 righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
3 Fire goes before him
 and burns up his adversaries all around.
4 His lightnings light up the world;
 the earth sees and trembles.
5 The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,
 before the Lord of all the earth.
6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness,
 and all the peoples see his glory.

This description of God is very similar to David's portrayal of God as God delivered David from his enemies in Psalm 18:

Psalms 18:7 Then the earth reeled and rocked;
 the foundations also of the mountains trembled
 and quaked, because he was angry.
8 Smoke went up from his nostrils,
 and devouring fire from his mouth;
 glowing coals flamed forth from him.
9 He bowed the heavens and came down;
 thick darkness was under his feet.
10 He rode on a cherub and flew;
 he came swiftly on the wings of the wind.
11 He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him,
 thick clouds dark with water.
12 Out of the brightness before him
 hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds.

Psalms 18:13 The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
 and the Most High uttered his voice,
 hailstones and coals of fire.

14 And he sent out his arrows and scattered them;
 he flashed forth lightnings and routed them.

15 Then the channels of the sea were seen,
 and the foundations of the world were laid bare
 at your rebuke, O LORD,
 at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.

Now think for a moment. What would an Israelite singing these psalms in the Temple remember after hearing such a description of God’s power and might?

Those who knew the Scripture—who knew the Law given by God to Moses—these worshippers would likely remember the Exodus and the scene of Israel gathered before God at the foot of Mount Sinai where God gave to His people the Ten Commandments. Here is the account in—

Exodus 19:16–18 On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the LORD had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly.

In Psalm 97, the psalmist is reminding the people of who God is, recalling to their minds as they sing in worship, the God who revealed Himself to them as the great Deliverer and Law-giver.

We need this reminder as well. As we prepare our hearts to come to worship, we need to ponder and remember that this is our God. His power and glory and strength have not diminished. He is the sovereign Creator and almighty Ruler. The Lord reigns!

So how does this land on you? How should this impact us? Verse 6 of Psalm 97 says:

Psalm 97:6 The heavens proclaim his righteousness,
 and all the peoples see his glory.

When all people see the glory of God, how do they respond?

Look now at the second half of the psalm. The psalmist begins in verse 7 with those who are not trusting in God. He sets up a contrast here in verse 7 with the rest of the psalm.

Psalm 97:7 All worshipers of images are put to shame,
 who make their boast in worthless idols;
 worship him, all you gods!

Those who are trusting in idols, setting their hope on something other than God—their response will be shame. They will be left with nothing.

The reality of who God is should be terrifying to those who are outside of God's provision in Christ. An idol might feel comforting now, but in the end it is worthless. No idol can turn away the wrath of God or satisfy His justice.

God alone can save us from sin and rescue us from condemnation. We must worship Him alone. We must not give our hearts to idols, expecting them to give us purpose and hope.

In the First Commandment God has said: "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3). He then declares in the Second Commandment:

Exodus 20:4–6 "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments."

Nothing can be equal or close to God in the affections of our heart. The Lord tells us in Exodus 20:23: "You shall not make gods of silver to be with me, nor shall you make for yourselves gods of gold." This is foundational to our worship! We must consider God first and keep God first. Worship is not about providing a platform for my likes and preferences. It is not about providing a platform to display my talents and skills. It is about God—exalting Him! Worship points us to Him, not to us. True worship is a passionate love for God; it is centered upon Him.

We must be careful to guard our own hearts from idols and worship God alone. We are called to serve Him and praise Him and worship Him in humble obedience. We see this in Psalm 95:

Psalms 95:3 For the LORD is a great God,
and a great King above all gods.
4 In his hand are the depths of the earth;
the heights of the mountains are his also.
5 The sea is his, for he made it,
and his hands formed the dry land.

This is our God, and in verse 6, our response:

Psalms 95:6 Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!

Paul tells us in Philippians 2: 10–11 that one day every knee will bow at the name of Jesus.

Philippians 2:10–11 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

For many in the Day of Judgment it will be too late. They will acknowledge Christ as Lord only to hear Him say, "Depart from me, I never knew you." We who know God and know His Word are to come in worship and humbly bow and submit our lives before Him now.

Notice now, beginning in verse 8, the contrast. There are three responses at the end of the psalm that mark the worship of a believer.

The first response is **joyful worship**.

Those who trust in idols are put to shame, but for those who trust in God, we read—

Psalms 97:8 Zion hears and is glad,
 and the daughters of Judah rejoice,
 because of your judgments, O LORD.
9 For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth;
 you are exalted far above all gods.

When we understand truly who God is, we will be glad and rejoice.

This echoes what we heard in verse 1:

Psalms 97:1 The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice;
 let the many coastlands be glad!

We are to be glad and rejoice. Our God reigns! Our Lord is Sovereign over all. This knowledge should season every thought and flavor every prayer!

Now notice, this psalm begins with praise. The psalmist lifts his voice with confidence and joy starting with the very first verse. Not all the psalms begin this way. Many open with cries of distress or sorrow. The psalmist is afflicted, persecuted, facing suffering or weighed down by trials. In these circumstances, as the psalmist pours out his heart before God, you will find petitions, prayers and laments. But as you read the psalms, you will also discover that the focus doesn't remain on the problems and difficulties and trials. Over and over throughout the psalms, the concern of the psalmist turns from his petitions and laments to God's glory and praise.

Look, for example at Psalm 13. David begins the psalm in desperation:

Psalms 13:1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
 How long will you hide your face from me?
2 How long must I take counsel in my soul
 and have sorrow in my heart all the day?
 How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?
3 Consider and answer me, O LORD my God;
 light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death,
4 lest my enemy say, "I have prevailed over him,"
 lest my foes rejoice because I am shaken.

But then David turns his thoughts to God's love and there is a noticeable shift:

Psalms 13:5 But I have trusted in your steadfast love;
 my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.

I will sing to the LORD,
because he has dealt bountifully with me.

Do you see the change in David's focus as the psalm begins compared to how the psalm ends? As he meditates and remembers the God to whom he is praying, his heart is turned from sorrow to praise!

In fact, if you read through the entire book of Psalms, you will see a noticeable shift in its content. Early in the Psalter you find many petitions and laments, but as you grow closer to the end of the book, the petitions and laments grow fewer and fewer until from Psalm 145 to the end there is pure praise. The Psalms culminate in a crescendo of praise that builds to the last verse (Psalm 150:6) and resounds in the final command: "let everything that has breath praise the Lord!"

The Book of Psalms begins with a blessing. Psalm 1 tells us that we are blessed when we turn away from sin and evil, and we delight in the Law of God and meditate upon His Word day and night. Those who know God—know His name, His character, His promises, His salvation—those who delight in Him will be:

Psalms 1:3 ... like a tree
 planted by streams of water
 that yields its fruit in its season,
 and its leaf does not wither.
 In all that he does, he prospers.

The remainder of the Book of Psalms is a glorious testimony that this promise is true. In every distress and storm where the psalmist feared that he would wither or fall, when the psalmist looked to God and trusted in God and clung to God's revelation of His character and promises and will, when he was confident that God would accomplish His purposes, then his focus turned from petition and lament to praise and rejoicing.

This is why Psalms is called in Hebrew a Book of Praises (*Sepher Tehillium*).

This has great implications for our worship today. If our desire is to have worship that honors God and enriches, encourages, and nourishes our souls, our greatest need to stop focusing on ourselves and remember God.

Think of this when we gather together for worship on the Lord's Day. Think of this when we come together for prayer on Wednesday nights. As you voice your concerns and share your heart, honestly confess your difficulties and struggles, tell God your sorrows and troubles, but don't stay there! Look to God! Our God reigns! Let your words dwell upon Him!

We continue in Psalm 97—

Psalms 97:10a O you who love the LORD, hate evil!

Here is the second response of God's people: **joyful obedience**

When we understand truly Who God is, we will love God and hate evil. We will desire to do things that pleasing to God and flee from things that displease Him. A true knowledge of God will stir us to pursue holiness. We will desire to do what is right in God's eyes; we will desire to do what is commanded in His Word.

And in our pursuit of holiness, we have God's help and provision. Verse 10 continues—

Psalms 97:10b He preserves the lives of his saints;
 he delivers them from the hand of the wicked.

11 Light is sown for the righteous,
 and joy for the upright in heart.

Jesus taught us to pray, "deliver us from evil." God is faithful and will do this for His saints. All that is necessary to sanctify us and complete the good work that God has begun in us, God will do. He gives us light and joy, and He preserves and delivers us.

Finally we see in verse twelve the third response of God's people: **joyful thanksgiving**.

Psalm 97:12 Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous,
 and give thanks to his holy name!

We see that when we understand truly Who God is, we will rejoice and give thanks at every remembrance of His name.

The psalm highlights the theme of joy in our worship of God. This is not a joy drummed up by an exhilarating experience or lively music. This is an abiding joy that comes from knowing the one true God.

When we have a right knowledge of God—

when we know who He is,
know His names,
know Him as He has revealed Himself in His Word

—that knowledge will profoundly effect our worship.

Our worship will be characterized by joy and humble thanksgiving. The New Testament echoes this response to God:

Philippians 4:4–7 **Rejoice** in the Lord always; again I will say, **Rejoice**. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice always and approach God in prayer with thanksgiving. We have no need to be anxious, Our God reigns!

Knowing that we have a God who is sovereign over all and who will provide for us all things needed to fit us for an eternity in His presence; **we can rejoice!**

In Exodus 20:24 God made a promise to His people, to those who know Him and know His Law and worship Him in light of Who He is.

Exodus 20:24 An altar of earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen. In every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you.

Notice it is God who initiates this. He causes His name to be remembered among His people. As we consider God when we come together for worship:

Preaching His Name together
Calling upon His Name together
Praising His Name together

God promises that He will come to us and be in our midst and bless us.

We no longer need an altar of earth or sheep and oxen for sacrifice; we preach Christ and Him crucified. But we do need to remember the name of the One whom we come to worship.

If we desire God's presence in our midst, and desire His blessing upon efforts; we must know Him and honor His name and worship Him as He has commanded. God and His Word, not us and our preferences, must be our primary focus as we worship God.

Ultimately worship is not about us. It is not about displaying our culture. It is not about promoting our music. It is ultimately about reflecting the glory of God and enjoying Him forever.

Our God reigns! Hear and be glad!

Let us pray.

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