

The Song of Glory

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[0 : 00] Good evening, people of God. Microphone's working. Good to be here tonight. Let's begin with a prayer. Lord, as we open your word, we pray that you would send your spirit, that we might have soft and receptive hearts and wills.

And as we look at your word, Lord, help us to receive it as people, not just who want to hear it, but also as those who want to do it. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Do take a seat. Take several, actually. If you want to spread out and take a little snooze, there's a few extra pews up here.

My name is Reverend Roger Revel, three R's. My preaching forte is alliteration. So, greetings from St. Peter's Fireside, my home parish, and a daughter church of St. John's. Warm greetings from all those in our church.

Now, as with many psalms, the psalm that we're going to look at tonight is tied to a particular event in Israel's past. We read about that event in the book of Chronicles, 1 Chronicles chapter 16.

In that chapter, the ark of the Lord is brought back to Jerusalem. That's a big deal. The ark represents God's presence, God's law. It was brought back to Jerusalem, and there's a lot of jubilation.

[1 : 12] There's a lot of song. And in 1 Chronicles 16, if you read the song that was sung when the ark was brought back to Jerusalem, guess what? It's verbatim Psalm 96.

Nearly verbatim Psalm 96, right? So, a little bit of familiarity with that historical event helps us to get at the heart of tonight's text. These are words which rejoice in the Lord's glory and majesty and salvation.

They revel in that, right? The logic of this psalm is simple. To see all of that is to rejoice. It is to rejoice. That's why this is one of the most blissful, happiest psalms in the Bible.

It's one of the happiest psalms in the whole Psalter, in fact. And this is a happiness which wants to be experienced and shared. In other words, Psalm 96 isn't just a psalm for us to read.

It's a psalm for us to sing. It's a psalm for our lips and out of our hearts. Indeed, that's one of the chief themes of this psalm. But here's the thing. This psalm doesn't just want to be sung by us.

[2 : 22] It wants to be sung by all sorts of people. God wants lots and lots of people to sing this psalm. So, this theme is going to be further illuminated as we stroll through the text tonight.

And as we do that, so as to assist us, I want to use three questions. Questions as we explore and seek illumination here. So, three questions. Number one, who should sing? Number two, why do people sing?

And number three, how do people come to sing? Who, why, and how? Sound like your grammar school teacher. Okay? As we move ahead, do keep your Bibles open because seeing God's Word helps us to hear it better.

That's page 499 in your pew Bible there. Who should sing? Now, the answer to this question jumps out on multiple occasions throughout the psalm.

This psalm, Psalm 96, doesn't just call Christian people to sing, right? It's not just for the church. It's for the whole wide world. Look at verse 1. Sing a new song to the Lord, all the earth.

[3 : 23] Verse 7. Ascribe glory and strength to the Lord, families of all the peoples. These types of invitations are sprinkled throughout this psalm, right? The God of the Bible desires His strength and His splendor, His salvation to be acknowledged by all people.

All types of people. Now, what does this mean? What does it mean to come to terms with this truth, right? For starters, it means that the God of the Bible is not a tribal God.

He's not a God of a certain nation or of a certain civilization. There are many people out there, maybe some in here, who have mistakenly picked up that impression. This is what it sounds like.

Christianity is a Western religion. It's the religion of Europe and North America. You ever heard that? Well, that can only be true if you utterly ignore what this psalm is saying, what God is saying, here and throughout the Scriptures and all sorts of places.

Jesus Himself proactively ministered to the Gentiles. And He sent His apostles to the four corners of the earth, well beyond the Jewish people. The scope of that activity is very much in sync with the scope of worship as it is envisioned by Psalm 96.

[4 : 39] Who should sing? Who should ascribe glory and strength to the Lord? All people. All nations. Red and yellow. Black and white. They are precious in His sight. It's worth noting that the psalm actually takes this a bit further.

Look at verses 11 and 12. It anticipates the trees singing and worshiping. It beckons the fields and the seas to glorify God. Hmm. Sometimes it seems that nature understands God's glory better than people.

Perhaps trees worship God because they're being what God made them to be. And perhaps people don't always sing of God because we've fallen away from what God made us to be. Psalm 96 looks to a comprehensive rectification where all of God's children marvel at their maker.

There is but one God and He's more than enough for everybody. That's the memo here. Moving on, let's consider why we should sing. The psalmist gives us some reasons.

See, worship, our worship of God is not evoked and sustained by abstract sentiment or wishful thinking. Right? You've got to recognize this if you want to embody the outlook of this psalm.

[5 : 53] So let's first look at verses 4 and 5. We're told here that God is to be praised above all the other gods. And then we're told why? Because they're worthless idols. The Hebrew there literally means nothing, a nothing.

Right? An idol is utterly insufficient. It's empty. It's got no lasting substance. Now in the Old Testament times, as some of you probably know, idols were represented by little statuettes.

And those little figurines were associated with things, common human needs. Food, fertility, that was a big one. Protection, even a sense of purpose, etc., etc.

Right? Whatever the case, all those little idols at that time, they shared a common flaw. They failed to capture the true and full essence of God. They simply didn't do justice to His majesty and His glory and His splendor and His strength.

In fact, they were quite pathetic by comparison. So, for instance, an idol that was built to ward off evil failed to express the true severity that God has towards all that is evil in this world.

[7 : 02] That's how it worked. Nonetheless, the human desires that stood behind the craving for those little idols, those desires are not in and of themselves irretrievably bad.

In many cases, they're just misdirected. Seriously misdirected. But they don't have to be. See, the desires there, they can be properly satisfied by the one who made us and the one who redeems us.

That's why the psalmist is blessing God. He's found the real thing. And I'm not talking about Coca-Cola. He's found the real thing. The real deal. And he's just got to tell people about it.

In this sense, to quote the Victorian preacher C.H. Spurgeon, Our mouths must be flavored with the doctrines of the gospel if we are to sing with zeal. He has a great way with words, doesn't he?

Like Jordan. What the psalm is asserting in verses 4 and 5 about these idols, still very relevant to us. The psalmist knows something that sometimes we miss.

[8 : 10] Every human worships. We all bow down before something. We all give ourselves to things apart from God. Yes, even us in this room. Yes, even me. That's true even if we're not using the language of worship and idolatry.

We're assigning weight to things that are in fact hollow and empty. And one of the most common consequences of that is impaired sight. We fail to see the true glory of God because we're falsely ascribing glory to other things.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, puts it like this. Whatever your heart clings to and relies upon, that's your God. That's your God. And if it's not God, then it's an idol.

And if it's an idol, you're going to be disappointed. Ultimately, that's all idols can do because they're finite, they're fragile, and they're fleeting. I mean, if your idol, for example, is money or material success, then you're always going to be in a precarious position because things could happen.

Things you can't always foresee, things you can't always control, that will sweep that away. And if that happens, you'll be devastated and crushed. That can never happen with God.

[9 : 23] That's what this psalm is telling us. His splendor and His majesty, His salvation, they don't need any assurance. They don't need any insurance, excuse me. Because nothing can threaten them.

So you want a reason to sing? Identify and renounce your idols, just like the psalms talking about here. And then pursue the real thing. Give your fear to the Lord, which is just a way of saying, take God more seriously than anything and everything else.

That's the only way to enduring and consistent peace and joy in this otherwise unpredictable world of ours. We've got to clear out the imposters. We've got to get our eggs in the right basket.

God's not going anywhere, but everything else is. There's another reason to sing. Look now at verses 10 and verses 13.

There's a so-called bad word here. Judgment. What's this about? Why is this psalm using that bad word? That's a bad word in our times, isn't it? Judgment. I don't judge.

[10 : 25] In both of these verses, however, there's something a little bit baffling. Because the psalmist is speaking about judgment with exuberance. He's happy about it.

Right? What's going on there? The judgment that's being spoken of here has a futurist orientation. It's something that will happen.

Specifically, it seems that the psalmist is contemplating the day of the Lord. That's sometimes called judgment day. Right? It refers to the return of Christ. Where in certain judgments over creation and all the people therein are going to be handed down.

Now again, to our minds, that word, this theme can carry an ominousness about it. Right? But not for the psalmist. It makes the psalmist sing in worship.

Why? That's the big question. Because God's future judgment is about making crooked things straight. It's about tying up frayed ends. It's about settling and redressing all the wrongs and injustices in creation.

[11 : 28] It's about putting things to right. Judgment day, in other words, entails decisive action by God to sort out and clean up everything in this world that's ugly, that's warped, and that's polluted.

This means that the future is better than the past and better than the present. And who doesn't want that? Who doesn't want God to eradicate sin and evil and disease and death and all the other maladies that strike on humans?

I mean, many of us probably give our money and time and maybe even our vocations right now to that type of work. When God judges in the future, that's what he's doing.

But, you knew there was a but coming. But, rejoicing in this coming judgment requires one thing more. You've got to make sure you can stand when it happens.

Or withstand it. The truth is this. Everything that's wrong in this world of ours corresponds to stuff that is wrong in us, within us, you and me, spiritually and morally.

[12 : 38] No one can live up to God's standards. We can't even live up to our own standards. So, where's our hope? How are we going to stand? We've got to know that we're going to be able to stand on that future day if we're going to sing today.

The clue is in verse 13b. God will judge the world in righteousness. In righteousness. What's God's righteousness?

What does that mean? I'm going to let Saint Paul answer for us. In the book of Romans, he says that the righteousness of God wears the face of Jesus Christ. And in Romans chapter 5, Paul says that the blood of Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified for our sins, for all that's wrong in the world and in us, that that blood will preserve us in the day of his wrath.

In the day of judgment. It works something like this. Imagine you go to a department store. You go to Hudson's Bay, downtown Vancouver. You find a shirt, some shoes, something like that.

You buy it. You check out. You pay. And as you prepare to leave, as you prepare to go down all 20 of those escalators that are inside that store, if you've been there, you know what I'm talking about. You hear something on the loudspeaker.

[13 : 53] And the voice says, there's been a theft. And so everybody's bag is going to be checked on the way out. See, if you stole that shirt, stole those shoes, that's an anxious situation, right?

But you don't have anything to worry about because you've got a receipt. And it says, paid for. Paid for. That's how it works for those who are hidden in Jesus Christ.

You won't be indicted again. You won't be billed again, right? It's been taken care of. Having faith is like having that receipt. Do you have it? Have you embraced that reality of God's gift for us?

Ask the question. Now, again, friends, I'm well aware that rejoicing in judgment seems a bit counterintuitive here, right? It's an idea that unsettles our default sensibilities.

We are, after all, progressive Vancouverites. I'm a progressive South Carolinian, if there's such a thing, right? But what we need to see in all of this is that the judgment that is coming is, in fact, the best thing ever possible.

[14 : 57] A restored creation, and we get to be part of it. But not just us. God wants others. Many, many others, in fact.

That's the thrust of this whole psalm. So let's turn now to the third and final guiding question. How people come to sing. Specifically, how do other people come to join into this song?

Not the people in church today, but other people. How do they come to ascribe glory to God? And the answer is pretty straightforward. Through us. Through us. Psalm 96 charges God's people to declare God's glory to others, right?

We're the subject of Psalm 96. Other people are the objects. And so while we're all very thankful to be here in this place, singing these great songs tonight of worship, right?

It can't stop there. Our Christian activity must be put forth day to day out there. Alas, as I see it, this is a task with which many of us can struggle mightily.

[16:00] Have you ever noticed how easy it is to converse about sports, or movies, or money markets, or genealogy? That's what we talk about in South Carolina. People are very interested in their family history and genealogy, right?

You can talk about all those things. Any number of topics we'll take up with other people. But when it comes to God, things can change very quickly. Discussion fizzles. Silence ensues. There's often a palpable measure of discomfort detectable.

That's quite a common phenomenon. Or should I say problem? We find it quite easy to talk about anything and everything except for God. And in a city like Vancouver, we know it increasingly well.

We can be very reticent to follow in the footsteps of Psalm 96. As a pastor, I witness this often amongst otherwise very sincere Christians.

What's going on here? As I see it, there are two common culprits. One's external and one is internal. Let's ponder, let's name and ponder these in closing.

[17:03] First, the external impediment to declaring God's glory all over the place. There's no way of getting around it. Psalm 96 makes a pretty darn exclusivist claim about God.

It says there's only one God and everybody should acknowledge Him. Now that claim runs against the grain of our culture, right? In fact, it carries a stench in our culture.

It's very much out of vogue. It does not comport with the dictates of radical relativism and radical tolerance. And in our part of the world, we have all been relentlessly conditioned to embrace that type of outlook, haven't we?

That has huge implications for spirituality and for our spiritual outlook. Theologian, apologist, missionary bishop Leslie Newbigin puts it like this.

He says, imagine an elephant. Now around that elephant, there are a series of people and they're all blind. And each person is touching some part of the elephant. They've all got their hand on something.

[18:06] The tail, the trunk, the foot, the ear, right? But no one has the whole elephant. Now if the elephant represents God, then that means that no religion has the corner market.

Everyone has some truth, some limited truth. Therefore, it's wise that we should all refrain from any type of exclusivist claim. Wait a minute.

Let's think about that for a second. That is a rather exclusivist claim, isn't it? And it has an uncanny similarity to the exclusivist claims that it's trying to silence.

Do you see that? I mean, moreover, to make a claim like that, you have to claim a superior point of view. Right? You have to be the one who is set back from the elephant.

Who can see everything and can see that everyone else is just touching part of the elephant. That's a bit presumptuous for a relativist, isn't it? It's time to detox from the radical relativism that easily injects our minds and closes our mouths.

[19 : 08] Closes them to praise God. I'm well aware that spiritual relativism is defended these days on the principle that religious exclusivism leads to ugly things.

It creates oppression. Right? I mean, that's why we're all worried about committing the capital crime of intolerance these days. Sure, that can happen.

But it doesn't have to happen. And in fact, whether that happens or not, whether it leads to things that are ugly and oppressive, that doesn't matter about whether the claim is exclusive. It matters about the character of God.

So let me just say this. In the case of Christianity, our exclusivist claim should not lead to oppression and ugly things. I mean, can you follow a God who died on a cross, who laid down his life for his enemies, and then go and bludgeon people who don't acknowledge him?

Can you give your life to Jesus Christ, the one who loved like no one ever before and did good like no one ever since, and then go out with hateful antagonism towards those who are presently outside God's family?

[20 : 11] Can you do that? I think not. At least if you know who Jesus is according to the Bible. Is all of this registering? I think when it registers, we're going to get a little bit of confidence to sing about God wherever we are, and that includes Vancouver.

And not just in this room tonight. Now, I mean, you're thinking, what does he mean practically? Does this mean that you need to go get a bullhorn and go stand on a street corner and berate people for God?

Does it mean that you need to go buy a box of tracks and slide them under the cubicles of your colleagues or the doors of your neighbors or through the little holes? No, probably not. It may. Listen to God.

Right? But does it mean that it's time to stop working so darn hard to downplay and minimize our association with God? Yes, it does. It does mean that.

Many of us are prone to that, and that's a tendency that needs to be checked. Second and final, let's talk about an internal impediment. Beyond the external cultural barriers to declaring God's glory, we can also meet some resistance within.

[21 : 20] I know I'm not the only one in the room. Some of us aren't singing new songs about the old story of God's grace for a different reason. What's the issue there?

It lies with the fact that while we may admit God's glory and salvation, we don't relish in it. We don't marvel at it. Our hearts are strangely cool. I've been there.

Perhaps that's what Martin... Perhaps we have what Martin Lloyd-Jones used to call spiritual depression. We're not recognizing the greatness of God in his gospel. Right?

The righteousness of God that I talked about a few minutes ago is rolling right off our backs like water off the back of a duck. And so the skip has fallen out of our step.

We don't sing. We don't sing about God to ourselves, much less to anybody else. We're like a dried up mountain brook. But how different that brook can be after the snow melts.

[22 : 17] There will be a mighty torrent. We need some snow to melt. The personal, animate, powerful affection of Jesus Christ needs to be reclaimed.

We need to be filled with the torrent of that living water. We need to taste the love and the forgiveness and the compassion and the transforming presence of God.

That's how we join in the choir of Psalm 96. After all, when you love something, you don't really care if people resist. You don't care if they don't approve. That doesn't shut you down. We need to abide in the love of God.

Not formally, but phenomenally, extravagantly. It needs to melt our hearts. Friends, we were made for this love. It's something that we can and should experience over the whole of our lives.

Even if it's not effusive at every single moment. Do you know this? Have you forgotten this? We should give ourselves to the pursuit of this love.

[23 : 20] And in closing, let me talk briefly and practically about how we do that. A few tips I want to offer again found in the text. Number one, do what the psalmist does. Contemplate God's majesty and God's splendor and God's salvation.

Meditate on his works of grace. We're very good at being specific when it comes to complaining about things that are missing from our lives that we want or things that don't seem to be quite right.

Let's learn to be good at acknowledging and celebrating God's goodness. If you're like me, you've got to work. It feels a little bit like an uphill battle. We've got to do that. Number two, worship.

Even when you don't feel worshipful. The psalm is filled with imperatives. Did you notice? Ascribe. Declare. Sing. Say. It knows that what we do affects what we love.

Worship. And the third thing to add to those two, pray. And seek prayer. Offer to pray for others. Invite others to pray for you. It doesn't matter if you've been in this church for two weeks or two decades.

[24 : 26] Don't be ashamed and don't be too proud to do it. Pray for a greater grounding in the love and the glory of Christ. That's no less than what Paul does in Ephesians chapter 3. So let's join with him and with one another in praying.

Praying that Christ may indwell our hearts through faith. That we may be increasingly rooted and grounded in the reality of God's love. God's word for God's people.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we thank you so much for the deep, deep love that you have for us. For the sacrifice that you made to extend that love.

Lord, our hearts can be hard and cold towards it sometimes. And so we ask that you would send the Holy Spirit. The one who convicts and enlivens and softens hearts. To receive what you have for us.

And to revel in that. And to sing. And to dance. And to take our part in the chorus of Psalm 96. In Jesus' name, amen.