

PSALM 47

PRAISE TO THE GREAT KING

Rev. Richard D. Phillips
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God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! (Psa 47:5-6).

On November 13, 2010, a crowd of shoppers was enjoying lunch at the food court of a shopping mall in Niagra, New York. The sound system began playing the opening notes of George Frideric Handel's *Messiah* when a young woman holding a cell phone suddenly stood and began singing in a beautifully trained operatic voice. "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Ha-le-lu-jah!" she rang out. Then a young man in a grey sweatshirt stood on his chair and chimed in, "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Ha-le-lu-jah!" A well-dressed couple standing by the ATM machine joined, followed by another couple and a maintenance man carrying a yellow "wet floor" sign: "Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Ha-le-lu-jah!" More singers joined as the chorus advanced: "For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth! Hallelujah!" More and more people stood from their tables, people of all ages, races, and walks of life. "The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of the Lord and of his Christ!" they sang. Still more came from the mall and a great choir surged to the crescendo: "And he shall reign forever and ever!" they sang in joyful precision. As the final "Hallelujah" was sounded, the singers raised their hands to heaven and then dispersed into the crowd from which they had come.

The Niagra mall *Hallelujah Chorus* is an instance of the "flash mob" phenomenon that has become popular in recent years. A flash mob is a carefully planned and choreographed performance of art – often singing or dancing – that is staged in public places with the appearance of spontaneity. As the author of Psalm 47 sees it, the *Hallelujah Chorus* flash mob is an example that ought to be followed

by all people at all times: a spontaneous lifting of hearts to the praise of the great king: “Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy! For the Lord, the Most High, is... a great king over all the earth” (Ps. 47:1-2).

A CELEBRATION OF GOD’S SOVEREIGNTY

The theme of Psalm 47 is the sovereignty of God. The Lord is to be praised as “King of all the earth” (Ps. 47:7). Kings are sovereign in that allegiance is due to them from all their subjects. Since God is the Creator and Lord of all the earth, every human being owes him faith and obedience. R. C. Sproul elaborates: “As sovereign, God is the supreme authority of heaven and earth... He created the universe. He owns the universe. His ownership gives him certain rights. He may do with his universe what is pleasing to his holy will.”¹

To the extent that most people think about God at all, they tend to conceive of him as a far-distant spectator of worldly affairs, taking no direct role himself. The Bible presents a far different picture: along with God’s royal authority, he actually reigns with his sovereign power. Psalm 13:6 says, “Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.” God is not aloof from earthly affairs, for as Psalm 22:28 says, “kingship belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.” The Bible extends God’s sovereign control to the individual affairs of every person, including you and me. Jesus said that not even a sparrow “will fall to the ground” apart from God’s will, and that “even the hairs of your head” are numbered under God’s sovereign control (Mt. 10:28-29).

The doctrine of God’s sovereignty is not popular with most people because men and women want to believe in their own sovereignty. We wish to declare, with William Ernest Henley in his famous poem *Invictus*, “I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.” God, however, refutes such human vanity, declaring himself alone the master of fates and captain of souls. “I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand,” the sovereign God declares (Dt. 32:39). “I am the LORD, and there is no other,” he insists. “I form light and create darkness, I make well-

¹ R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1986), 24.

being and create calamity, I am the LORD, who does all these things” (Isa. 45:6-7). The Bible declares, “The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts” (1 Sam. 2:7). Divine sovereignty does not mean that people do not exercise wills and make decisions, for the Bible teaches that man has a true will, however fallen and enslaved to sin, and is responsible for his actions. God’s will is yet achieved in all things, even in and through the sinful acts of wicked people. Jeremiah wrote: “Who is there who speaks and it comes to pass, unless the Lord has commanded it? Is it not from the mouth of the Most High that both good and ill go forth?” (Lam. 3:37-38).

Kings rule by way of royal proclamations sent throughout the land. God likewise rules by sovereign decree. Psalm 47:8 says: “God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne.” From that throne the decree of God accomplishes all his holy will. Paul says, for instance, that believers in Christ are saved by God’s eternal decree, “having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Eph. 1:11). Isaiah 46:9-10 sets forth God’s decree as sovereign over all things: “I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.’”

According to the psalmist, God’s unrestrained sovereignty extends to all peoples, whether they believe or not. He indicates this universal lordship by naming God as both “Yahweh” (seen in English Bibles as “the LORD”), the covenant name God gave for the use of his people Israel, and “the Most High,” a name used to unbelievers to declare the sovereign deity of Israel’s God. Since he is the sovereign God, the psalm sounds a universal summons to praise: “Clap your hands, all people! Shout to God with loud songs of joy!” (Ps. 47:1).

SOVEREIGN IN JUDGMENT & SALVATION

The psalmist praises God especially for his sovereignty in judging his enemies and saving his people. First, “He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet” (Ps. 47:3). This statement likely refers to Israel’s conquest of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, which involved God’s vengeful judgment on the godless people previously occupying the land. The imagery of having people under one’s feet refers to the ancient practice of placing the foot on

the throat of captives conquered in battle. Israel's victory did not result from any power or virtue of her own but was the sovereign act of God in judging his foes: "he subdued peoples under us." Such judgments did not only happen during Israel's conquest of Canaan but take place throughout history, so that all men and women should praise and fear God who is sovereign in judging sin and evil.

In 1961, Arnold Toynbee concluded his massive project, *A Study of History*, which he began in 1934. Toynbee identified thirty-four distinct civilizations, noting that each in succession rose, fell, and then passed away. Egypt was an early great power but has long since fallen from imperial might. Bablyon once lorded over much of the earth but now is largely a barren desert. Greece and Rome rose as successive marvels, but both fell into ruin and were conquered. More recently, the Soviet Union flashed into power before falling in turn. James Boice comments: "Even the United States of America, though now at the very pinnacle of world power, is in decline and will not escape the inexorable law of history, namely, that 'Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people' (Prov. 14:34)."²

One after another, each of these powers have believed themselves sovereign over the earth, but have each learned the truth of Psalm 47:7, "God is the king over all the earth." History shows that when nations pursue righteousness in accordance with God's revealed will, they thrive and gain power. Not that any nation, or any person, perfectly fulfills God's holy law so as to be righteous by its works. Yet nations that are generally honest, respectful of life, and cultivating of virtue will usually experience a corresponding blessing under God's hand. On the other hand, history shows that nations founded on greed and fleshly passion, and which cultivate wickedness and violence, inevitably fall into ruin, however great they once thought themselves to be. The lesson is that God's judgment of the nations should cause us to praise the Lord and also to fear him. Fearing God means that we respect his sovereign Word and tremble to rebel or disobey his commands. "For the LORD, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth" (Ps. 47:2).

The fear of God is a lesson taught by Sennacherib, the Assyrian conqueror who took the title "great king" for himself (Isa. 36:4).

² James M. Boice, *Psalms*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 2:396.

Sennacherib raised his power against God's people, so that the Jewish king, Hezekiah, knelt before God seeking protection. Hezekiah addressed God as the great king, praying, "O LORD of hosts, God of Israel, enthroned above the cherubim, you are the God, you alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth; you have made heaven and earth" (Isa. 37:15). In answer to Hezekiah's prayer, the Lord slew the entire Assyrian army of 185,000 soldiers, and shortly afterwards Sennacherib was killed, his claim to sovereignty having thus been debunked.

Hezekiah also shows us that however much its worldly detractors may hate the idea, the sovereignty of God is a source of special joy and comfort to the Lord's people. Just as God saved Jerusalem, our salvation is established by God's eternal decree and upheld by God's sovereign might.

Psalm 47:4 celebrates God's sovereign grace, saying, "He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves." This statement probably refers to God's gift of Canaan, a land of "milk and honey" (Ex. 3:8), to be the inheritance of his people. Within Canaan, the Lord portioned out land to be a heritage for each tribe, clan, and family, and this inheritance was the pride and joy of Israel and a symbol of God's love. As redemptive history advanced with the coming of Christ, we find that the Promised Land was symbolic of the whole landscape of salvation that comes to us through faith in Jesus. Like Israel in Canaan, our salvation blessings are God's sovereign heritage and gift of love to us.

The New Testament explains God's sovereign grace as the source of our salvation. Salvation begins with God's eternal predestination of chosen people, who are effectually called to faith by Christ through the power of his Word, and who as a result are justified, sanctified, and glorified. Paul states: "Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Rom. 8:30). Just as the Old Testament Jew could celebrate how God "chose our heritage for us," Paul locates our blessings in Jesus Christ: "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace" (Eph. 1:4-6).

It is this same sovereign, saving grace that animates Psalm 47. For not only does God's sovereignty in salvation give us comfort and hope, but it motivates us to praise our great, saving King. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever," Paul concluded (Rom. 11:36). The psalmist echoes this call, extolling God's sovereignty in both judgment and salvation: "Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy! For the Lord, the Most High, is... a great king over all the earth" (Ps. 47:1-2).

WORTHY OF OUR PRAISE

The setting of Psalm 47 is revealed in verse 5, which says, "God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet."

Scholars believe that this verse refers to an annual festival which celebrated the Lord's enthronement, probably with a procession of the Ark of the Covenant up to the temple. It is possible that the psalm even refers to the first coming of the Ark, the footstool of God's throne on earth, into Jerusalem during the time of David. This setting fits Psalm 47's theme of Israel subduing the Promised Land, a multi-generational event that concluded when David captured Jerusalem and brought God's throne up to Mount Zion. Moreover, verse 5 has identical wording in the Hebrew as 2 Samuel 6:15, "David and all the house of Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of the horn." Psalm 47 seems to have been composed in response to this event or in later years to remember David's enthronement of God's ark on Mount Zion.

As God's people celebrate the ascension of the Lord to his throne over the earth, we are reminded that God's sovereignty is a cause for the greatest joy. To have God reigning is to enjoy great blessing, so that none who look to the Lord in faith will have a cause for disappointment. This is especially true under the gospel of Christ. C. F. Keil notes that "The true and final victory of [the Lord] consists not in a submission that is brought about by war and bloodshed and in consternation that stupefies the mind, but in a change in the mind and hearts of the people, so that they render joyful worship unto Him."³ Christians see a parallel to the bringing up of the Ark to Jerusalem in the ascension of Jesus to his sovereign throne in heaven. Seeing our

³ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, 10 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), 5:341.

Savior enthroned above brings joy to our worship and spurs us to offer praise to God in his name.

Psalm 47 gives five descriptions of praise that should be exhibited in our worship. First, Israel's praise to God was *joyful and exuberant*. "Clap your hands, all peoples!" the psalm begins. "Shout to God with loud songs of joy!" (Ps. 47:1).

Having notes this call to exuberance, we should also note the difference between our worship services today and the scene recalled in Psalm 47. This psalm does not describe the regular gatherings of the Israelites for worship but a special and celebratory festival. In the original event, when King David brought the ark into Jerusalem, he leapt and danced before the ark as it advanced into the city. That symbolic act, performed on a unique occasion by a unique person who was a type and forerunner of the Messiah, does not establish a warrant for liturgical dance in churches today. Likewise, Psalm 47's call for festival revelry does not mandate shouting and loud clapping in our worship services any more than for Israel's regular worship gatherings in Old Testament times.

Nonetheless, in light of God's sovereign grace our worship ought never to be dour, dull, or detached. Christians gather as those who have every reason to rejoice, and therefore spiritual delight ought to be evident in our worship. The shout of God's people and the blasting of trumpets brought down the walls of Jericho when Israel entered the Promised Land (Jos. 6:2) Shouting and the blowing of horns accompanied the crowning of Israel's kings (1 Ki. 1:39). Jesus will return to the earth with the sounding of the trumpet and the shouting of newly resurrected mouths (1 Cor. 15:52). Christians should hear that trumpet whenever the gospel is preached or sung, and the clamor of God's grace in our hearts ought to produce a joyful excitement in our worship.

True worship is joyful and, second, is *reverent and awe-filled*. Many people today think that one can be *either joyful or reverent*, but the Bible joins them together. Psalm 2:11 urges us to "rejoice with trembling." We tremble at the majesty of the glory of God and we rejoice over his grace and tender mercy.

Reverence is expressed in worship that is in accordance with God's Word. This, too, was taught by David when he brought the ark up to

Jerusalem. His first attempt ended in disaster because David failed to consult the Scriptures. A group of Levites were bringing the Ark of the Covenant up on an ox-cart, and when the Ark tottered one of the priests, Uzzah, steadied it with his hand. In response, the holy God struck Uzzah dead for daring to touch his holy throne with an unholy hand (2 Sam. 6:6-7). David realized his error, consulted God's instructions for worship, and only then was able to succeed in bringing up the Ark. The writer of Hebrews urges us to do the same, writing: "let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:28-29).

Third, Christians should worship God with *skillful music*. We see this in verse 6, which four times exhorts us to sing before the Lord: "Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises!" The Hebrew word *tamer* encompasses both singing and the skillful playing of music. Christians may not all have voices that they consider attractive or talent for musical instruments, but every recipient of grace has a song to sing and should joyfully offer music to God's praise in Christ. According to the book of Revelation, we will be singing to God's glory in heaven, and Psalm 47 tells to start practicing now! William Plumer points out, "how closely the singing of praises is connected with a lively state of piety."⁴

Fourth, we are called to worship God *thoughtfully*. We see this at the end of verse 7. The English Standard Version renders this "sing praises with a psalm!" The King James Version, however, calls us to praise "with understanding." The original Hebrew states that we are to "sing a *maskil*." We have encountered this term in the superscription to some of the previous psalms of the Sons of Korah (Psalms 42, 44, and 45). While the precise meaning is not known, scholars believe that a *maskil* is a song of instruction, since the root word contains the idea of wisdom and skill.⁵ As Jesus emphasized to his disciples, believers are not to offer mindless phrases to the Lord in our worship, which is what the pagans do in their prayers (Mt. 6:7). Instead, we must approach God in terms of clear, biblical truth and therefore our music must be biblical in doctrinal content. Our singing

⁴ William S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1867, reprint, 1975), 529.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-78* Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity, 1973), 178.

should arise from hearts that are inspired by gospel truth, just as we read about in Revelation regarding the worship of heaven (Rev. 4-7).

This does not mean that our worship needs to be academic or overly intellectualistic. Murdoch Campbell relates a visit to a believing friend who was drawing near to death. His friend recounted the day of his conversion to faith in Christ, calling it “that wonderful morning” when God transported his soul “into the ocean of His love.” The man’s mind drifted away and Campbell could tell that his heart had turned to worshipping God. As the man silently relished his blessings in Christ his voice could be heard softly repeating: “wonderful, wonderful.” So also should our praise, privately and together as a church, revel in the wonders revealed to us by God’s Word. Campbell writes: “God’s people praise and adore Him for what He is in His own essential Being. They praise Him for His love revealed in the gift and in the work of His dear Son, and for rescuing their souls from eternal death... They praise Him for those fuller enjoyments of His love awaiting them in the world to come.”⁶

EXALTED IN THE END

Lastly, Psalm 47 insists that praise is to be offered to the Lord *Universally*. In other words, everyone is to worship the king who is enthroned over all the nations. It is with this principle in mind that the psalm concludes not with a command but with a prophecy: “The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham” (Ps. 47:9). Psalm 47 began with a call to “all peoples” to clap and shout to the Lord, and it ends with a promise that believers from all “the peoples” will gather as one “as the people of the God of Abraham.” The expression “the princes of the people,” may refer to believers serving as representatives of their tribes and nations before God, and it may also indicate that the Lord is able to overcome the leaders opposed to him and subdue their hearts with grace. “The shields of the earth belong to God,” says the psalmist, meaning that all the resources of might on the earth are at his disposal, and no power can stand against his sovereign will for salvation.

⁶ Murdoch Campbell, *From Grace to Glory: Meditations on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1970), 89-90.

It is heart-warming for us to realize that a psalm that praises God for his sovereignty comes to its climax in the worship of God from the lips of sinners redeemed by his grace. Thus God's ancient promise to Abraham will be fulfilled when the gospel of Christ has run its course through history. God promised Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:2-3). With the fulfillment of that promise, as all the redeemed gather as "the people of the God of Abraham," God's sovereign power is proved. More than that, we celebrate the sovereign mercy he has bestowed on a vast multitude from all the nations, who gather forever to sing the praise of our Savior King. Because of God's sovereign grace for sinners, the psalm concludes: "he is highly exalted!" (Ps. 47:9).

In light of this prophecy, you see why the Niagra *Hallelujah Chorus* flash mob so well depicts Psalm 47 in its spontaneous and expanding praise to our sovereign God. The words of Handel's *Messiah* will literally become true: "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). Just as in the food court where that chorus was sung, the choir began growing as the song went forward. Starting with one singer and then a few, others who were watching began standing up and joining. This is exactly how the prophetic vision of Psalm 47 is taking place in history. In the end, Christ will be highly exalted through all the earth. But this choir grows one at a time, as the song of the gospel is spread from one voice to another. Have you joined this glorious chorus, believing on Jesus so as to lift your praise to him as the sovereign, reigning King in heaven? If you have, is yours a witness of joy that will inspire others will join in?