

February 18, 2018
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Psalms
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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WORSHIP THE LORD BECAUSE HE IS HOLY Psalm 99

It is possible that there are 1,000 or more signs in the metro-Greenville area advertising that worship takes place in particular buildings at particular times each week. Within a two-mile radius of where you sit, there are over twenty such signs letting the world know that worship goes on in a particular building. What does it look like? Why does it happen? What do the people involved plan to accomplish?

Some people have argued to me that what looks like worship to me does not seem like worship to them, and I admit that I argue the same way. The result is a real mixed bag of nuts that has worked out in the past couple of decades to very diverse forms of worship. The contrast between these forms has been rightly called “Worship Wars” in several books and articles published over the years.

But while public worship seems to get all the attention, maybe a more important expression of worship is neglected. Why don’t people talk about private worship? Why are there few, if any, arguments about what constitutes an individual’s private worship before the Holy God? Maybe the reason such discussions are rare is because such worship is rare. I am convinced that even the so-called “super-Christians” spend comparatively little time in worship through reading the Bible, praying, and meditating on God. Worse, in my opinion, is that the average American Christian spends no time in private worship unless they stumble into a crisis in life.

Where there is little or no private worship, we can be pretty sure that corporate worship is probably going to be a bit askew of God’s intent. That would be like a bunch of musicians getting together having not practiced any particular piece of music and then playing

whatever strikes their fancy. Where there was no practice, how could there be continuity of expression? I think that kind of music is called Jazz, where every man plays that which is right in his own ears.

In this psalm, we discover the major determiner for worship. It is the LORD’S character. If we are going to praise the LORD appropriately, we will have to know who He is. Spending little or no time with Him will never give us an accurate picture of who He is. On the other hand, the better we know the LORD our God, the more accurate our worship of Him will be.

The Call to Worship (vv.1-5).

The text declares that the LORD is great (vv.1-2). But more to the point, we are reminded here that the LORD is fearsome. Great includes fearsome. And so the psalmist calls to us, *The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake (v.1)!*

Because the LORD is great and fearsome, people tremble. Humans dislike this idea. No one wants to be afraid. We naturally do all we can to protect ourselves from things that make us afraid. As a result of this aversion to fear, we have created a make-believe society. As little children, we fear things that do not exist. Your kids might have gone through a period in childhood when they wanted you to check their bedroom for monsters before they would settle down to sleep. Unfortunately, many parents so protected their children from non-existent monsters that they grew up and went to college no more mature than a three year old. Now they have to have safe spaces and rooms filled with stuffed teddy bears and coloring books so they will not be afraid of perceived monsters who tell them truth.

Why are people so afraid of truth? Why does Bible truth seem fearsome to so many people? If people accept the truth about events and circumstances in their little world, they might have to accept truth that is beyond their scope of experience. If some fearful things are truth, is it possible or likely that all fearful things are true? That line of thinking will eventually arrive at questions like “Who am I?” “What is my purpose?” “Am I the product of a Creator?” To conclude that we are the creation of the God of the Bible, to conclude that the Bible story is true, is a terribly fearful thing.

But again we ask, “Why is the Bible story so fearful?” The short answer is given by the writer to the Hebrew Christians, *It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Hebrews 10:31)*. If the God of the Bible is alive and is who the Bible reveals Him to be, everyone is in deep trouble. We are in trouble because we are born offending that God. We are in trouble because He has promised to punish all people who offend Him in hell forever. The God described by the Bible is faithful to His promises and mighty enough to do all He promises. That reality should cause people to tremble!

The Bible truth strikes fear like the quaking earth strikes fear. One way the God of the Bible proves that the Bible record about Him is true is by His control of natural elements. Natural disasters, natural phenomena, catastrophes of nature always cause people to ask questions about God. It is ironic to me that whenever there is a serious, devastating natural disaster, questions about God pop up. People who throughout life deny that God exists, reject the Bible message out of hand, and mock Christians who love God claiming we are fools will often be the first people to ask, “What kind of God would allow thousands of innocent people to be killed?”

When God shakes the earth, it reminds people that God is mighty and we are subject to His majestic will whether or not we care to admit it. Whether anyone cares to acknowledge the truth is irrelevant. The LORD reigns all the same. He sits as King. The simple declaration that the LORD reigns (v.1a) reminds us that Yahweh, the ever-existing, almighty God is now and for eternity ruling as King. No one has to believe it to make it a reality. No one has to accept His rulership or authority. But His reign IS.

The LORD sits enthroned upon the cherubim (v.1b). The LORD does not sit enthroned like earthly kings. They are surrounded by their body guards, advisors, and servants – all of whom will die just like the king will. Our King is enthroned upon the cherubim. That is a strange statement to us because we really do not know what cherubim are. The cherubim are not mythical creatures but are presented as some of the LORD’S chief servants. They are some kind of heavenly creature similar to an angel. God placed these angelic creatures at the Garden of Eden to keep the fallen Adam and Eve out and away from the tree of life.

We see the Old Testament mentions cherubim at least fifty-seven times, and that is mostly in connection with the angelic figures God commanded to be crafted to sit on the mercy seat on the ark. The mercy seat that covered the ark is the place where God promised to meet with His people as the high priest offered sacrificial blood for forgiveness of sins. It is a picture of God’S throne in heaven where the actual cherubim surround God and do His bidding.

Sporadically through the Bible we find pictures of the angelic beings ministering to the LORD at His throne. God gave Ezekiel a vision of this scene in heaven. Ezekiel wrote, “*Then I looked, and behold, on the expanse that was over the heads of the cherubim there appeared above them something like a sapphire, in appearance like a throne*” (Ezekiel 10:1). Sadly this is how God demonstrated the departure of His presence from the temple in Israel before Nebuchadnezzar came to destroy it.

It is also possible that the Cherubim are the same as or similar to the Seraphim that Isaiah saw at God’S throne or the living creatures John saw at God’S throne. Satan was originally one of these divine creatures. God wrote through Ezekiel regarding Satan, “*You were an anointed guardian cherub. I placed you; you were on the holy mountain of God; in the midst of the stones of fire you walked*” (Ezekiel 28:14).

The point in all of this is that our LORD sits as King in authority over all things, even the astonishingly powerful and incomprehensible angelic world. Reigning from Zion He is exalted over all. *The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples (v.2)*. The term Zion is often a reference to God’S holy city, the chosen city of Jerusalem. But notice that the LORD is exalted over all the people not just Jews in Israel or Jerusalem specifically. The “all peoples” mentioned in this verse refers to all nations, tribes, people groups who ever existed. The LORD must be exalted by all people because He creates and sustains all people.

Even greater is the truth that Zion became a title to describe all of God’S chosen people. While it is true that throughout the Old Testament Zion referred to Jerusalem, when we come to the New Testament we discover it takes on a much broader application. Writing to Christians, the author of Hebrews wrote, *But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly*

Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:22-24).

If anyone should know and demonstrate the greatness and glory of the LORD it should be us His born again people. He is not just a friend like “Joe” or “Sally.” He is not a safety net who catches us when we have been foolish. He is not an advisor who we have on a retainer so we can go to Him for advice when we are in trouble, but ignore the rest of life. Our Lord reigns as King over all things and all people. He is awesome and fearsome, deserving all exaltation.

And He is all of this because, first and foremost, the LORD is holy (vv.3-5). The LORD’s character is holy. *The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob (v.4).* In His strength, the King loves justice. In His might the King can do whatever He chooses to do. But what He does is always just. He is not like pagan gods, imaginary gods that are capricious, lustful, unpredictable, and generally angry.

Furthermore, this verse explains that the LORD loves deciding cases according to the right standard. Our King is unlike human kings who make judgments according to outside pressure, personal desires, or what is expedient. Our King uses His power to do what is right every time.

The LORD the King knows what is right because He has established what is straight. God has to do what is right because He has determined the standard of right. Literally this could be translated to say that He has established the level place, the straight way. The word *equity* pictures the crooked road being made straight, the mountainous terrain leveled out. Human opinion, in contrast, is as crooked as a West Virginia back road. God’s truth is the established measurement for right, straight, or level. All human opinions of truth must be measured against the Bible revelation of truth — the straight way God has established.

The King loves justice, establishes equity and, therefore, he must also execute justice and righteousness. To execute is to bring about, make happen. All of God’s activity in life is just and right. *Righteousness* has to do with right relationships between people and

between God and people. God always acts toward us according to what is right and acceptable. People act according to what is popular and acceptable among fellow sinners. The result of that is political correctness which acts as a wedge of conflict because of differing human opinions. We prefer that God would act toward us according to what He has already established is right. Therefore, “What kind of God would do that?” is never, ever the proper response to God’s work in any realm. The kind of God who does what God does is always the God of justice and righteousness.

What is the proper response to a God who always thinks right, judges right, and acts right. All the peoples should praise His name. *Let them praise your great and awesome name! Holy is he! (v.3).* The preceding verses, thoughts, and arguments have established the fact that the LORD is holy. The term holy, contrary to common use, does not mean, religiously strict, distinct from the mainstream, not fitting into the culture. Those are often symptoms or results of being holy.

That the LORD is holy means that He always does that which is just and right because His character is just and right. He must act according to His character. The conflict comes because the LORD’s actions are observed in a wicked, sinful, unjust, unholy, unrighteous world. Holy looks distinct, separate, and unacceptable because everything and everyone around us is unholy by birth and nature.

It is as though everything in and about the world is navy blue. All people, all things, all activity is tainted with varying intensities of navy blue. The LORD is not navy blue. He is brilliant gold. When He interrupts the navy blue world with His activity, it is obvious, and not acceptable to navy blue people who are of the opinion that everything must be navy blue. To them navy blue alone is right. But to God, who is actually responsible to determine what is right because He is Creator, gold is right and just.

The right response to God’s glorious works of gold is praise. It is good and right for us to respond to God by declaring how awesome He is. Therefore, we are challenged to exalt Him through worship. *Exalt the LORD our God; worship at his footstool! Holy is he! (v.5).* Because God is holy, exalt Him. The root to the word translated *exalt* might describe the peak of Mount Everest, which means to be high.

More exactly, as the word is used here it means to be lifted up, promoted, rewarded.

Many of us are watching the Olympics these days. In certain venues where the competition is intense, there is great exhilaration when the athlete from our country wins the gold. It is okay if he or she wins the bronze or silver metal. But the winner of the gold gets to be lifted up on the highest platform. Imagine one special metal for the best athlete of the entire competition. Suppose the Olympic committee decided to award one platinum metal to the athlete who collected the most gold metals throughout the two weeks. We would rightly consider that person to be most highly exalted. Seeing God lifted up to the podium He deserves far outweighs any exaltation humans can give or receive.

Because God is distinct from our sinful world, fall before His footstool. The servant bowing with his face to the dust before his master is an accurate picture of the Hebrew word for worship. Translated into our setting it means that we come and bow our hearts, our spirits, our minds before the LORD who is holy. Seeing God as a good buddy is not worship. Seeing God as a soft, cuddly teddy bear is not worship. Seeing God as a capricious, mighty god like Thor is not worship. Seeing God as the mighty Creator who is powerful enough to create, sustain, or destroy, but the God who at the same time loves us like the Heavenly Father He is and bowing before Him because we love Him, is worship.

Worship of the Holy Illustrated (vv.6-9).

The record of the Bible is the story of how the the LORD'S servants called to Him. Three examples of servants like that are Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. *Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called upon his name. They called to the LORD, and he answered them (v.6).* Moses and Aaron were the LORD'S priests. The priest was the intermediary between God and the people. In Moses's and Aaron's day God spoke His instruction, warnings, laws and judgments to the priests who communicated them to the people. The people brought their sacrifices to the priests who offered them to God for the people.

Through Jesus Christ, we believers in Christ have become a kingdom of priests. Hear John's address to Christians. *John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen (Revelation 1:4-6).*

What is our priestly work? Peter explained that *You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).* And as a spiritual house, *You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9).*

In a similar way, Samuel was the LORD'S prophet. The prophet declared the LORD'S message. In that sense, we all are messengers of the LORD. And like all the great servants of the LORD, we are able and should call to Him.

We call to Him because the LORD answers those who call to Him (vv.7-8). Sometimes God answers in a spectacular way as, *In the pillar of the cloud he spoke to them; they kept his testimonies and the statute that he gave them (v.7).* In Moses's day the LORD'S servants were so greatly privileged to hear God speak from the cloud.

Was it the nearness of God's voice that caused Moses, Aaron and Samuel to keep the LORD'S testimony? Or did they? That is what the text says. "Oh sure" someone is going to argue. "Didn't God keep Moses and Aaron out of the Promised Land because they broke God's rules?" And Samuel didn't raise his sons very well. To that criticism, I respond, "Oh that I could be as faithful as those guys were."

It would have been pretty spectacular to hear God speak through a cloud or audibly as He did to Samuel. But isn't the Bible a more sure and thorough word of prophecy? Peter thought so. Having witnessed the glory of Jesus accompanied by Moses and Elijah, Peter wrote, *And we have something more sure, the prophetic word, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts,*

knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19-21).

Like God's servants from the past, call out to God. The promise is that, even though God might not answer from a cloud, God always answers righteously. *O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings (v.8).* Our God answers us. He answers because He is a forgiving God. Thus, God answered Moses, Aaron, and Samuel as they interceded for the sinning people.

The pronouns are very significant in this verse. First we read that God answered **them** referring to Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. Second, we read that God forgave **them** which probably refers to Moses, Aaron, Samuel and the people who sinned against them and God. Third is the statement that God avenged **their** wrongdoings. That doesn't quite fit God's response to Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. However, it does seem likely that God avenged the wrong doing of the people who sinned against the servants of the LORD.

Therefore, in light of this God who always plans and acts in accord with righteousness, we must exalt the LORD. The exaltation will involve worshiping Him at His holy mountain. *Exalt the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain (v.9a).* In our hearts, spirits, minds, we should lift up the LORD. We should bow our hearts before Him as we adore Him. His holy mountain would have referred to the location of the temple, the place of God's presence with His people. Today that is ourselves, and as a Church, the place of corporate worship. We, as well as all other Christians gathered before God, are His holy mountain.

The good reason for this kind of worship is *for the LORD our God is holy!(v.9b).* We bow before our LORD and exalt Him in our hearts because He is other-worldly. The LORD is out of this world because He always thinks, decides, and acts according to perfect righteousness. Our LORD is like a burst of golden light in our navy blue world. We should have been impressed with God's holiness many times this week. Now as we gather together, we bring all those experiences of private worship together to exalt God as He ought to be exalted.