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Lord of Righteousness

By Rick Marrs

In the past couple of years a great deal of superb material has been written on the Psalms. As a backdrop to my comments, I would like to mention a recent book by James Mays entitled **The Lord Reigns**. It is his theology of the Psalms. Mays says that in mainline Protestant churches, the Psalms have had a tremendous impact, not only at the liturgical level (being read and used in worship), but also at the theological level. For in the Psalms we have the language of what it means to be the people of God. Mays suggests that the royal sovereignty of God is the root metaphor in the Psalms. He points out the abundance of royal rhetoric that they contain—God as Lord and King of the universe, the spheres of his dominion, his throne of righteousness and justice. If the Lord is truly sovereign, then he must have a special people whose lives he orders. The people of God as described in the Psalms are servants of a royal monarch. I would suggest that we ought to try to recapture the Old Testament psalms, not only for use in our worship, but also to help inform our theology. To this end, I would like for us to consider four psalms: Psalms 100, 15, 24 and 73.

Functions of the Psalms in Worship

At a very basic level, the Psalms are theological. They articulate and lead us into doxology—the praise or glorification of God. They allow us to recognize and to testify that glory belongs to the Lord alone. One could say that their logos, their word,

their meaning is God. They are theology. They are the Word of God. The subject of their praise is always God.

Secondly, psalms function in the service of God. In the Psalms, those who pray and praise God depict themselves, typically, as servants of the Lord. Thus Mays comes again to this concept of the “reign of God.” He relates a wonderful rabbinical story:

God finished his creation of the world in five days. He asked one of the angels, “What do you think of my creation?” And the angel replied, “Well, it’s perfect, there’s no question about it. But if you would take a suggestion, there is one more thing that you could do. You ought to create something to acknowledge how perfect creation is. And so God, on day six, created humans so that they could praise Him and what He has done in creation.

A central function, or service, of humans is to offer praise to God for his creation.

The Psalms are also confessional. Praise as doxology, as offering glory to God, simply declares that God is. But praise as confession or affirmation states *who* this God is that we worship. A striking line in Psalm 22 states that God is enthroned on the praises of Israel. Israel is a unique group of people, for she is aniconic. Peoples around her have idols, but not Israel, because God has created humans in his

image. Humans do not create images; God has already done that. In Psalm 22, the other nations

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may have thrones on which they place their idols, but Israel enthrones God on her praises.

The Psalms acknowledge that we constantly tend toward polytheism. We are always about the business of creating gods, and the Psalms function to bring us back to praise of the one God. If we think in those terms, then “praise” also has an evangelical function. These hymns, these praises, invite *all the earth* to join in offering praise to God. As the church praises God with these psalms, it participates in summoning the nations and people around to take on a different mentality (what we call “repentance”), and to trust their present and their future to the reign of God (what we call “believing the Gospel”). The Psalms may use a slightly different language, but they have that evangelical theology—the sovereignty of God, and what it means for God to be Lord of the universe and of his people.

Psalm 100: A Theology of Monarchy

Psalm 100 sets forth, as well as any psalm, a theology of worship. Notice its structure of imperatives. The first three or four imperatives are a call to praise; the last one gives the basis and the content of the praise. It states who God is and what the congregation is, and it opens the gates of grace into his holy presence. The question is, who sings this hymn? Psalm 100 says, those whom Yahweh has brought into existence. Anyone who clearly understands that God has creator-rights over him is invited to sing. Now, where do the singers stand? They stand not in a *place*, but in a *presence*—the presence of God. The imagery of Psalm 100 is theo-political, if you will, in its orientation. It is monarchy from beginning to end. “Come into his presence” is the language of an audience before a king. Indeed “worship,” if we literally translate it, means *serve* him. Where else do we find this kind of language? In

Exodus: *Serve the Lord in lieu of the Pharaoh*. We find it in Deuteronomy: *Serve the Lord in lieu of other gods*. So when we are invited into the presence of God to *serve* him, we are being invited as subjects into the kingdom and realm of God.

One aspect of worship involves opting for one power structure over another. We are saying that the God into whose presence we have come is our Lord and our King. Ironically, while this kind of monarchy language should be rather intimidating, it seems that phrases like “Jesus is Lord” and “Jesus is King” often roll glibly off our tongues. Perhaps this is because we have not experienced life under a monarchy. We may see God more in terms of a benign president. We can vote him out of office. We can override his vetoes if we need to, and if there are times when he is a little out of control, we can just work around him. But as we begin to understand the concept of God as King as set forth in the psalms, we become aware of the gravity of such a confession.

The worship of Psalm 100 is confessional. “*Know that the Lord is God!*” That is less a statement of cognition (intellectual awareness) than of recognition (acknowledgment). It is again equivalent to a statement in Deuteronomy: “*Know that the Lord is God, the Lord alone!*” He is the only God out there, the only one to whom we will pledge allegiance. Psalm 100 unashamedly invites anyone into that realm. Is it not ironic that we are *invited* to become subjects of this king? In our experience, to give over one’s complete rights to a king is threatening and dangerous. And yet in Psalm 100, our response to that surrender is to be joy—joy that is based on this God, this Lord, this King to whom our praise is directed.

The last section of Psalm 100 is an act of praise. As has often been noted, Hebrew has no way to express “thanks.” When we say “thank you,” we are the subject: “I” thank “you.” But in Hebrew, praise is of such a nature that it is always directed away from the person doing the praise to that which is being praised. Somehow, God can be both the object and subject of praise.

How do these ideas fit with our New Testament theology? The apostle Paul argues that our identity begins and ends with God’s identity. Listen to the Pauline equivalent of Psalm 100: “. . . *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own, . . .*” Psalm 100 says, “*We are his . . . we are his people.*” Paul says, “. . . *You are not your own. For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.*” (I Corinthians 6). We are not our own, and our only proper response is to praise God. Note the conclusion of that praise: “*The Lord is good.*” God

is one who confirms, who sustains, who fulfills our existence. In Psalm 100, the question is, are we willing to live in a monarchy? We are able, through the Psalms, to behold the King. Acknowledging that we may not be able to see the *what* of the future, are we willing as a congregation to offer praise for the *who* that waits there?

Integration of Worship and Ethics

As we turn to Psalms 15, 24, and 73, I want to discuss the integration of worship and ethics. We tend to compartmentalize the two; we talk about ethics, or we talk about worship. Our lives are similarly compartmentalized, so that we talk in terms of the “Sunday phenomenon” and the “Monday to Saturday phenomenon.” But for Israel, worship and ethics were integrally linked.

In Psalms 15 and 24, we read what seem to be entrance requirements. Who can come into the presence of God? What are the criteria? Are these guidelines designed to be barriers? The language is very striking: “*Who may abide?*” The old archaic translation reads, “*Who can sojourn?*” The idea of sojourn is wonderfully descriptive, because when one is a sojourner, he knows that he is a resident alien. In the ancient Near East, a sojourner or stranger was always assumed to be an enemy and a threat. Having determined otherwise and invited him in, the host became responsible for the stranger’s safety. Recall the many passages in the Old Testament in which a host was bound to protect the stranger or the resident alien. We come to God initially as enemies, and yet he invites us in and offers us his divine protection. What can this be but a theology of reconciliation? We have been invited as guests into the presence of God. But as guests, we must be willing to accept the stipulations that the master of the house has set forth.

There is a rabbinical story that Moses gave the people 613 commandments, and David in Psalm 24 distilled them down to ten. We find here ten “commandments” for entering the presence of God. We are not talking about prescription here; we are talking about a picture. Certainly, these are not intended in an exclusionary way. Who needs to come into the presence of God but sinners? What we are being reminded of is the seriousness of the lives that we are bringing before him. This sounds very much

like the prophets, does it not? They do not challenge God’s people for their mechanics of worship or their routine. The prophets address the quality of the lives that the people are bringing into God’s presence. We ought to struggle with that as well. What kind of people are we as we come into the presence of God? To what degree do we examine the lives that we are bringing? Do we appreciate our utter inadequacy as compared with God’s holiness? Consider these thoughts of Peter Craigie:

What transforms the psalms from a barrier to a gateway is the realization that the preparation for worship illuminates also the necessity for worship. On the one hand we must live in such a way that we may prepare for worship with integrity, without hypocrisy. On the other hand, the introspection involved prior to worship clarifies beyond any doubt the need for forgiveness. Failing to have fulfilled the ten

conditions, we require forgiveness before we can enter the divine presence. Only then do we realize that the privilege may never be casually exploited and also that the Holy God is not inaccessible.¹

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There are three distinct parts of Psalm 24. God,

by virtue of his creation of the world, retains exclusive ownership of it. The psalmist then describes the ethical standards that are expected of those who would gain access to his sanctuary, as in Psalm 15. Finally, there is a call for the gates to open and let the King of glory come in. In the first two verses, the central theme is the acknowledgment that God owns the world. As creator, he has right of ownership. We may possess the world, but we do not own it. This idea needs to be affirmed in our worship. Then, who can live under God’s reign? Those who seek the presence of the owner of the world and allow him to own it. “*Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false . . .*” Living under God’s reign has never been simply a matter of rules and regulations. It has always been a matter of character. Israel does not compartmentalize. She understands that ethics have a terrific impact on worship.

What is the purpose then of coming to the

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sanctuary? Psalm 24 suggests that it is to seek *blessing* and to seek the *righteousness*, or (NRSV) the *vindication* of God. *Blessing* is this gracious provision that God gives to sustain our lives. *Righteousness* is his divine acceptance—our invitation into his presence. Are we willing to accept that? We are allowed in, though we do not deserve to be there. How do we live when we realize we have been allowed into a place where we do not belong or do not deserve to be? We live with clean hands and a pure heart. That is the kind of lifestyle that the kingdom generates.

Renewal of Vision

Psalm 73 presents another purpose for coming to worship: to gain perspective. The psalmist cannot square his Monday to Saturday experience with his Sunday experience. He knows that the Lord takes care of the pure in heart. But Monday to Saturday, he sees repeatedly that the righteous do not necessarily prosper, while the wicked do. As he struggles with this, he realizes that he cannot think his way out of it. He says, "If I had expressed this, I would have been untrue, not only to myself but to those who are studying with me." So he goes to church, and when he comes into the sanctuary, everything falls into place. He sees it. Why do we gather to worship? Because Monday through Satur-

day, our lives are constantly getting out of focus. We are inundated with the apparent injustice and unfairness of the world and of life. We gather to renew our vision, to see things again through the eyes of God. To see lives as God intends us to see them. To gain a new depth perception. To refocus. We gather with believers to hear the story that the Lord is good, and that the world that we live in is his world, not ours. We are tenants and subjects and servants.

Conclusion

How should the Psalms inform our worship? Mays is right. We need to recapture the Psalms, not just liturgically but theologically, for they can inform us theologically about who we are, about who God is, and about what it means to live in a world that God as Lord and King has created. The Psalms allow us to hear afresh God's view of the universe as creation, not happenstance. They allow us to rethink our view of God as sovereign Lord. They call us to reform our lives according to the will of the King who has invited us, as servants and subjects, into a kingdom that we do not deserve. And they allow us to refocus and correct our vision as we struggle with the ambiguities of life.

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Note

¹P. Craigie, **Psalms 1-50, Word Bible Commentary**, 153.