**Everyone is called to worship the Great King**

Text: Psalm 97

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**Scriptures:** Psalm 97, Acts 17:22-31

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 97, 439, 331, 72

**Series:** Kingship Psalms (#6)

**Theme:** The glorious, majestic, righteous and just reign of the Lord over the whole universe calls everyone everywhere to worship Him in joy, love, holiness and thankfulness.

**Proposition:** In joy, love, holiness and thankfulness, worship the Lord who reigns over all.

**Introduction**

When the Apostle Paul was Athens ‘*he saw that the city was full of idols*’ (Acts 17:16). In that 1st century leading Greek city, there were statues of gods and goddesses in the Parthenon – a temple built in the mid-5th century BC to the goddess Athena Parthenos. The Parthenon stands on the hill of the Acropolis and is surrounded by other pagan temples. In the building and public spaces of Athens there were many altars, shrines and religious images.

It was against this background that Paul addressed the Athenian men on a hill near their Acropolis called ‘the Areopagus’ which means ‘Mars Hill’. He said to them: "*Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you*” (Acts 17:22b-23).

The Athenians were worshippers, as are all human beings – it’s part of our spiritual ‘DNA’ – an in-built design characteristic of who we are. If we don’t worship the One True Living God, then we will worship something or somebody else. The cities of this world are full of objects and people to which, and to whom, human beings dedicate their praise, their time and talents, their devotion and their allegiance. When a good thing (or a bad thing for that matter) becomes the best thing, an idol is created in the heart of a person. Therefore, anything or anybody can become an idol for people like you and me. Reformer John Calvin famously wrote ‘hominis ingenium perpetuam, ut ita loquar, esse idolorum fabricam’ [Institutes I.11.8], that is “the human heart is a perpetual idol factory’.

Psalm 97 calls every human being to worship the LORD who is the Great King who reigns in perfection over all that He has made. We’re going to look at this psalm this afternoon under three headings:

1. The focus of true worship
2. The way of true worship
3. The call of true worship
4. **The focus of true worship**

Many people in New Zealand were celebrating as the results of the General Election came in last weekend. Just over 49% of voters were in favour of a Labour government and they would have been glad to hear the outcome of the Election. However, a significant number of people would not have been so happy. It is hard to conceive of an election result which would make everybody happy isn’t it?

Psalm 97 is not about the response to a poll to determine the next civil government, it is the revelation of the Lord’s glorious global government being one of the ‘Kingship psalms’ (together with Psalms 29, 47, 93, 95, 96, 98, and 99). It’s a call for **everyone** to rejoice in the global government of the Lord. You can see the extent of the Great King’s dominion in the first verse: “*The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice; let the many coastlands be glad!*” The ‘coastlands’ here are the ‘distant shores’ of places and people groups both near and far away from the tiny nation of Israel. Yet the LORD, the covenant God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is in authority over them. This was true back when Psalm 97 was written (some commentators have suggested that this time was after Israel’s return from exile – pointing to the phrase ‘the daughters of Judah’ in v8).

The reign of the LORD is just as true now as it was then and has always been throughout all history. For example, the LORD reigned over this world when Paul wrote to the saints in Rome most likely between the end of AD 55 and the early months of AD 57. The Emperor at that time was Nero. During his rule, he murdered his own mother, Agrippina the Younger; his first wife, Octavia; and allegedly, his second wife, Poppaea Sabina. In addition, ancient writers claim that he started the great fire of Rome in A.D. 64 so that he could re-build the city centre. It was to the Roman Christians living under Nero’s cruel and ungodly worldly rule that Paul wrote about the universal reign of the LORD in these words: “*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God*” (Rom 13:1).

Human governing authorities vary. Not all are as wicked as Emperor Nero, but none is completely morally upright and fair in all of their dealings. Few human governments promote godliness. None have the power to ensure lasting order and enduring human flourishing on the earth. The LORD, the overarching ruler of His entire creation is unlike the sub-rulers that He reigns over and through. His unique glory, power and purity are expressed in verses 2-5: “*Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. Fire goes before him and burns up his adversaries all around. His lightnings light up the world; the earth sees and trembles. The mountains melt like wax before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth.*”.

These words mirror the description of the manifestation of God’s majesty at Mount Sinai in thunder, lighting, smoke and fire (cf. Ex 20:18-21; Deut 5:22-26). Fire represents divine holiness in its destructive hostility to sin (Ex 3:3-5; 19:16-18; 20 cf. Lev 9:24). The clouds and thick darkness function as veils which shield the eyes of creatures like us from the fierce heat and brilliance of God’s great glory (e.g. Ex 19:9; 1 Ki 8:12). They are like the curtain which closed off the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle and temple (Ex 26:33; 2 Chr 3:14) veiling it in darkness.

God’s people in Old Testament times yearned for good government. This desire was frequently expressed in terms of a throne established by righteousness and justice (e.g. Prov 16:32; 25:5; 29:14 cf. Ps 9:7-8; 103:6,19). Mountains symbolize stability and enduring strength – but they cannot stand before the Lord. Just as the hardness of wax becomes soft and flows down to be a puddle, so the towering peaks of solid rock melt before the Lord (cf. Micah 1:4; Nah 1:5). {Wax has a relatively low melting point (typically between 46-68°C)}. The twice repeated phrase ‘*before the Lord*’ in v5 is not a typographical error but emphasises a certain truth. This restatement (cf. ‘he comes’x2 in Ps 96:13) highlights The Lord’s kingly rule over the whole universe. “*The mountains melt like wax* ***before the LORD, before the Lord of all the earth****.*”.

God has revealed His overwhelming glory so that “*the heavens proclaim his righteousness, and all the peoples see his glory”.* God is the focus of all true worship. Christ, the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15) appeared, not veiled in cloud and darkness, but incarnate in flesh and blood. Gospel writer John proclaims, “*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). Jesus is the Great King to whom Psalm 97 points. He also shows us the way of true worship, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The way of true worship**

The smallest baby after birth cries when they are hungry. Human beings are hard-wired by design to need physical nourishment. That need is part of who we are as bodily beings just as worship is also a need which God has designed into us. This is part of who we are as spiritual beings.

Worship finds expression in the secular world as people praise sports stars, business leaders, political leaders, their homes, their cars, anything in fact which to them is most worthy of adoration and respect. An idol may be defined as ‘*a physical image or form representing a reality or being considered to be divine*’. When the descendants of Abraham lived in Egypt as captives, they were surrounded by the Egyptian deities who were represented in human-animal forms.

The first rebellion of the Israelites in the wilderness focused around the worship of a golden calf (Ex 32). In this act of false worship, they broke the second commandment: “*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*” (Ex 20:4-5a). Later the bronze serpent which Moses set up in the wilderness to resolve the problem of the plague of serpents (Num 21) was kept by Israel and made into an object of worship (2 Kings 18:4). The good kings in Old Testament Israel’s history were notable for their action in removing idols from the land and restoring true worship (e.g. Jehoshaphat - 2 Chron 19:3; Hezekiah – 2 Chron 29; Josiah – 2 Kings 23:4-8).

Idolatry is sin against the Lord God who alone is worthy of worship. Idolatry is also ultimately pointless, because no man-made idol has the power to save those who worship it (Isa 44:17). This is the central truth we find in Psalm 97, verse 7: “*All worshipers of images are put to shame, who make their boast in worthless idols*”. Idols are worthless, of no value, on the day the Lord’s coming because they will be unable to deliver (cf. 25:3; 37:20; Isa 1:29; Mic 3:7). The consistent teaching of the Old Testament is that trusting in idols brings shame and disgrace (Isa 1:29; 42:17).

The way to worship the Great King is to behold His glory and majesty, His power and purity, His righteousness and the reality of His being. The way to worship God is to rejoice in the power that He has over all that He has made: “*Zion hears and is glad, and the daughters of Judah rejoice, because of your judgments, O LORD. For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth; you are exalted far above all gods*” (Psalm 97:8-9).

The way to worship God is to love Him for who He is and to confess with a humble heart that there is none like Him. The way to worship God is to praise Him for rescuing those who love Him and to reject evil because He alone is perfectly good and only ever does good (Psalm 119:68). As the Psalmist writes in v10: “*O you who love the LORD, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he delivers them from the hand of the wicked*”.

The way to worship God is through Jesus Christ, who died, like a seed falling into the ground, so that those made righteous in Him would have His resurrection life. This psalm points forward to the reality of the Messiah, who was yet to come when these words were first written in verse 11: “*Light is sown for the righteous, and joy for the upright in heart*”. The way to worship God is with joy that Christ has opened up the way for us to respond to the call of true worship, which brings us to our third point.

1. **The call of true worship**

We are familiar with the ‘call to worship’ at the start of our services on the Lord’s Day. This is where the person leading congregational worship, on behalf of God, calls the congregation to come and express their praise, adoration and thanksgiving to their Lord as they have gathered to hear His voice and receive His blessing. The psalms contain many ‘calls to worship’ addressed to God’s covenant people e.g. Ps 113:1 “*Praise the LORD! Praise, O servants of the LORD, praise the name of the LORD!*”

Here in Psalm 97 there is a general call to worship addressed to false objects of worship: “*worship him, all you gods*” (v7b). This is really a call to all those people who worship empty idols. It is the same call that the Apostle Paul issued to the Athenians on Mars Hill saying: “*Being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man. The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead*" (Acts 17:29-31).

It is a call to worship Christ the King of Kings and Lord of Lords who is coming to judge the world from His glorious throne (Matt 25:31). He will not come with the clouds and thick darkness of Mount Sinai around him, but he will ‘*tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh, he has a name written, King of Kings and Lord of Lords*’ (Rev 19:15b-16).

Jesus Christ is the only man who is rightly to be worshipped (e.g. Matt 28:17) because righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. The heavens proclaim His righteousness, and His people see His glory. When He returns everyone will see the glory of Christ and every knee will bow before the Great King (Phil 2:10-11). Everyone will be there on that day, your neighbours, your friends (Christian and non-Christian), and your work colleagues, those you study with at school and college, all the people you meet as you live your life. No one will be absent. Attendance will be 100%.

There are people you know who understand that you ‘go to church’ on a Sunday, but do they know why? Have you explained to them that you go to worship the Lord with gladness, and joy, in love and with thankfulness? I know that many of you have invited non-believing friends and family to come and worship with us as a congregation. Psalm 97 encourages us to continue to call everyone to worship the Lord and to turn away from worthless idols who will not ultimately deliver on the promises of these ‘false gods’ which our hearts tend to make out of anything and anybody.

Congregation “*The Lord reigns, let the earth rejoice, let the many coastlands be glad!*” because the Lord preserves the lives of His people and calls them to worship in love, joy and thank to his holy name!

AMEN