

Psalm 96

It is Good News that the LORD Reigns!

1. Message

The LORD reigns – this is good news and it deserves to be sung with a new song.

The Psalm uses three different words to command God's people to make known among the nations that "the LORD reigns!" The first word (v. 2b) means "to proclaim the good news"; the second word (v. 3a) means "to give an account of"; and the third word (v. 10a) means "to say". The first of these words is by far the least common and the most striking – it suggests that the declaration that "the LORD reigns" is good news that deserves to be made known.

The focus of the Psalm is outward – Israel is never mentioned, but repeated reference is made to "all the earth" (vv. 1, 9), "the nations" (vv. 3, 10), "the peoples" (vv. 3, 7, 10, 13) and "the habitable world" (vv. 10, 13). The good news that the LORD reigns must be made known everywhere.

2. Structure

Verses 1-9 form a unit comprised of 3 sets of 3 lines each; these are laid out so that verses 1-3 are matched by verses 7-9, and verses 4-6 are the centrepiece which declares the LORD's greatness.

Verses 10-13 form a second unit. The emphasis moves from the LORD's greatness to his moral purity – he "decides for the peoples in uprightness" (v. 10c) and he "judges...the peoples in faithfulness" (v. 13c). The great goodness and the good greatness of the LORD are the cause of rejoicing even in the inanimate world (vv. 11-12).

A. Proclaim the LORD's salvation! (Sing, bless, proclaim, relate: vv. 1-3)

B. The LORD's greatness exposes the emptiness of the gods (vv. 4-6)

A'. So submit to the LORD's authority (Give, offer, worship, tremble: vv. 7-9)

C. Say that the LORD reigns! (vv. 10-13)

The repetition of "sing...sing...sing..." in vv. 1-2 climaxes in "proclaim his salvation". A similar repetition of "give...give...give..." in vv. 7-8 climaxes in the call to "bring a tribute offering". A shorter staircase in v. 13 ("he comes, he comes") climaxes in the reason for the coming of the King, namely, "to judge the earth". These staircases give vibrancy and urgency to the message of the Psalm.

3. Comments

(a) Proclaim the LORD's salvation! (vv. 1-9)

Notice the repetition of the first words in vv. 1-2, 4-5, 7-8. This suggests that the climax in each section comes in the second half of each second verse, and that each third verse is an expansion of the message, i.e. each section comprises repetition, culmination and explication:

- Verses 1-3

Repetition: "Sing...sing...sing..."

Culmination: "Proclaim the good news of the LORD's salvation." (The word translated "proclaim the good news" describes the action of a messenger who comes from the battlefield with news of victory; see how it is used in Isa. 52:7).

Explication: "Tell the story of the glory of the LORD and his wonderful deeds, especially the 10 great signs he performed in the land of Egypt."

- Verses 4-6

Repetition: "For...for..."

Culmination: "The LORD made the heavens."

Explication: "True greatness, splendour, majesty and beauty belong to the LORD – unlike the so-called 'gods' which are actually empty nothings." (The word translated "idols" really means "things of no value or meaning; it rhymes mockingly with the word for "gods", i.e. the "elohim" (gods) are "elilim" (zeros)).

- Verses 7-9

Repetition: "Ascribe...ascribe...ascribe..."

Culmination: "Bring tribute to the LORD." (The word translated "offering" also means "the tribute that subject peoples bring their king".)

Explication: "Prostrate yourselves before the LORD's splendid holiness, and wait upon him with eager expectation." (The word translated "tremble" means "writhe", and it is used of a woman in labour; it points to Rom. 8:22.)

(b) Say that the LORD reigns! (vv. 10-13)

The LORD's greatness is matched by his goodness. These verses open and close with words that describe the moral purity of the LORD's actions: they are acts of decision (v. 10) and judgement (v. 13), and they are done in uprightness (v. 10c), righteousness and truth (v. 13c).

That is what v. 10 means when it says that "the world is established, it will not move." The word translated "world" means "the habitable world, the world of mankind". So the point is that the righteous reign of the LORD provides for the stability of human society (the point is not that the globe won't wobble).

Of course, we do not see as much stability as the Psalm might lead us to expect. But then we need to notice the last case of repetition in the Psalm: "For he comes, for he comes" (v. 13). The culmination is "...to judge the earth"; and the explication is that "the LORD will judge all people everywhere with absolute justice and truth." It seems natural to infer from this that the Psalm is looking forward to the final coming of the King on "the Day of the LORD" – the day on which all wickedness will be cleared out of creation, and all things will be made new (which brings us back to Rom. 8:19-25). That is good news worth celebrating with joy, gladness, thunder, exultation and shouting (vv. 11-12).