

# Psalm 98

## *Sing Praise to the Saving King!*

The title of Psalm 98 is simple: “A Psalm”. This belies the profundity of the Psalm which announces the need for a new song. The “old-new” song was sung by Moses by the Red Sea after “the LORD the King” (v. 6) had decisively delivered Israel from Egypt; the “new-new” song is and will be sung because of the LORD’s even greater victory in Christ. This is a Psalm to be sung to the Saving King!

### 1. What is the song’s pattern?

Psalm 98 comprises three stanzas (vv. 1-3, 4-6 and 7-9). Stanzas 1 and 2 open with imperatives (“sing!” and “shout aloud!”); stanza 3 opens with a jussive (“let them thunder!”) – the Psalm is becoming progressively louder.

In broad brushstrokes the Psalm suggests the following pattern of questions:

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|-------|-----|---|
| St. 1 | A.  | Why sing? Because of the LORD’s former work of salvation. |
| St. 2 | B.  | Who is to sing? All the peoples of the earth.             |
|       | C.  | How to sing? With joy, led by the Levites and priests.    |
| St. 3 | B’. | Who is to sing? All of creation.                          |
|       | C’. | How to sing? With all of their being.                     |
|       | A’. | Why sing? Because of the LORD’s coming work of salvation. |

### 2. Who is to sing?

Stanza 1 does not say who is addressed by the opening command to “Sing!”. But the last word of verse 3 (“our God”) indicates that it is spoken by and to Israel. So although the Psalm talks about the nations (indeed, the whole of creation) rejoicing before God the King, the Psalm itself was sung by Israel. In this way the Psalm widened Israel’s expectations about God’s purpose for the other nations (and, indeed, the whole of creation).

Stanza 2 explicitly addresses “all the earth”, i.e. the nations. It is significant that the closing words of the stanza are universal – not “before the LORD, our King”, but “before the LORD, the King”. The nations are being encouraged to embrace the reign of God on an equal footing with Israel.

Stanza 3 addresses the whole of creation (“the sea...the inhabited world”, “the rivers...the mountains” – Hebrew poetry often uses contrasting pairs to speak of the whole of creation).

So notice how the joyful acclamation of the salvation of the King spreads out in widening circles: Israel → the nations → the whole of creation. God’s purpose in salvation is not just to deliver a few people from the wreckage of this present evil age, taking them out of the world and into heaven. God’s purpose is far, far grander than that! His purpose is to reconcile the whole of creation to himself

(Eph. 1:10). The church is a “pilot plant” which demonstrates here and now that Christ has achieved this reconciliation by his death on the Cross (Eph. 2:14-16). God’s ultimate purpose in this is to be praised for his manifold wisdom (Eph. 3:9-11). That is why in Psalm 98 the joyful acclamation of the salvation of the King spreads out in ever widening circles.

### 3. How are they to sing?

The Ps. becomes progressively louder: “sing!” “shout aloud!” “let them thunder!”

Stanza 2 especially uses the language of temple worship: the singing of Psalms to the accompaniment of lyres (the function of the Levites) and the blowing of trumpets and horns (the function of the priests). It opens and closes with the command to “shout aloud!”.

Stanza 3 depicts creation as thundering, clapping and giving a ringing cry. It is possible to imagine these noises being produced by the dynamic, energetic movement of the sea, water flowing in fast streams, and wind in mountain valleys. Praise is to be given by our whole mind (St. 1), our whole heart (St. 2) and our whole being (St. 3).

### 4. Why are they to sing?

The “why?” of praise is written through the Psalm. We sing to the saving King. Each of the three stanzas of the Psalm uses the language of salvation.

In stanza 1 the word “salvation” is found in vv. 1, 2 and 3. (Remember that the name “Jesus” is from the Hebrew for “salvation”.) This stanza makes us think about the Exodus salvation by using the phrases “marvellous things” (c.f. Ex. 3:20; 15:11), “his right hand” (c.f. Ex. 15:6), “his holy arm” (c.f. Ex. 6:6; 15:16), and “he remembered his mercy and his faithfulness to Israel” (c.f. Ex. 2:24).

Stanza 2 changes the picture of salvation. It opens and closes with a word that makes us think of the shout of triumph (e.g. Josh. 6:5,20). The trumpet (v. 6) was used for rallying the people in battle, but it was also used to put God “in remembrance of his people” for their salvation (Num. 10:9-10). The horn (v. 6) was used to proclaim release in the year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:9). So the picture in stanza 2 is of the victory, salvation and release God grants his people.

The word translated “break forth in song” (v. 4) is used 8 times in the OT – 5 of these occasions are in Isaiah’s “Book of Comfort” (Isaiah 40-66). This associates the salvation described in stanza 2 with the return of the exiles from Babylon.

Stanza 3 brings the song of salvation to a climactic ending – the King is coming for a new and final work of salvation; it is this that really calls for the new song with which the Psalm opens. This final salvation is a matter of justice (good government), righteousness (good relationships) and uprightness (everything set to rights). By implication, the King will judge and punish all oppressors.

The saving King is Jesus Christ. The Psalm lauds his victory at Calvary. We enter into that victory now, and so we sing his salvation now. But by singing his praises now we are also getting ready to sing his praises when he comes again with full and final victory (Rev. 15:3).