

## Rejoice: the Lord Reigns Psalm 97:1-12

Let's wax a little nostalgic for a moment. **How many of you remember the old station wagons with the fold up seat in the back? How many of you owned one? How many of you rode in the way back seat?** We always had to take turns riding there. It was fun to wave at the people in the vehicles behind us. It was also fun looking out the back window at where we had been.

If you were in the middle seat, you could look ahead, which meant looking at the back of a head, so you looked out the side window at where you were at that moment of the trip. Occasionally you might wave at the car next to you that you were passing or that might be passing you.

If you sit in the front seat, sometimes you look out the side window, but generally you look ahead at what is coming.

Reading through the Psalms is a lot like those station wagons. Some look back in history and reflect on the past at what God had done for the nation of Israel or for the individual, like David. They are Psalms of thanksgiving for His provision, or protection, or for promises kept. Often, they reflect on trials and the deliverance provided by the Lord. He then offers his thanksgiving and praise for who God is or what He had done.

For example, **Psalm 32** is a reflection by David who, after contemplation, acknowledged his sin and experiencing forgiveness by the Lord. The Psalm ends with a call for the righteous to be glad and rejoice by singing praise to the Lord. Rejoice about things in the past.

Other Psalms are captured in the moment. The writer was encountering a trial or experiencing some blessing. He would call out in prayer for God's protection or offer praise for His provision.

**Psalm 34** is a good example. It begins with lifting up the Lord all the time with praise readily on our lips. It's in the present tense, meaning praise is not something that is to be reserved when the crisis is

over, but rather right when we are going through it. In the moment of our trial, praise is to be spoken with an invitation given to everyone nearby to join the thanksgiving. The psalmist shares the trials he has encountered requiring him to call on the Lord to deliver him. It's followed by the Lord's responding with deliverance. The psalmist gives reason after reason why the Lord is good and worthy of praise.

Another example of praise offered in the moment of trouble is when King Jehoshaphat faced the Assyrian armies. He cried out to the Lord regarding the trouble the nation was facing. He then assigned singers to go ahead of the army and sing praises to the Lord. God heard and responded by setting His own ambushes against the invading army leading to their defeat. The Israelites didn't wait until after the victory to sing their praise, but instead offered it during the crisis and God delivered them.

I hope that during this Thanksgiving season, you have taken some time to look back and reflect on God's past blessings and give Him praise.

I hope that you also took some time to consider His blessings in the present and offer your thanksgiving.

Scripture says that God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. It's a reminder that we should also look to what is yet ahead, things unknown to us but which elicit praise based on the promises God has made even though they are still in the future.

That's what we find in our Psalm today. It considers events that are ahead of us with an invitation to offer the Lord our thanksgiving now.

With that, open your Bibles to **Psalm 97**. This Psalm picks up where we left off last week. Look back at **Psalm 96:11-13: Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let the sea resound, and all that is in it; let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them. Then all the trees of the forest will sing for joy; they will sing before the Lord, for He comes, He comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in His truth."**

Last week we noted that because of sin's curse,

even the world is groaning, waiting for the day of God's redemption (**Romans 8:18-25**) of His people, a day that is still future. When the redemption of God's children is completed, **"creation will be liberated from its bondage to decay"** (v. 21). Part of that liberation will include a judgement that is yet to come. But even that judgement is a cause for thanksgiving as we will see from this Psalm.

Some scholars refer to this Psalm as a song about the Lord's second coming, a time in our future, when He will once again step into humanity and bring judgment. As we just saw, this Psalm picks up the theme of the closing verses of **Psalm 96**. He will judge His enemies but reward His people. The focus of **Psalm 95** is on God's people, Israel. The focus of **Psalm 96** is on the nations. The focus of **Psalm 97** combines the two groups with the focus on the God of heaven who rules and controls everything and will bring judgment. His people have nothing to fear in that judgment and so can offer their thanksgiving.

Notice first that it is a call for the earth to rejoice.

## **I. IT IS A CALL FOR THE EARTH TO REJOICE – vv. 1-7**

This call for the earth to rejoice is sprinkled throughout Scripture. These passages echo the sentiment of our Psalm by noting that the earth and all that is in it has reason to rejoice because of God's command.

### **A. The Earth Rejoices Because of God's Command – v. 1**

We saw from **Psalm 96:11-13** that the earth rejoices. Other passages echo that praise.

**Psalm 65:11-13** **"You crown the year with Your bounty, and Your carts overflow with abundance. The grasslands of the desert overflow; the hills are clothed with gladness. The meadows are covered with flocks and the valleys are mantled with grain; they shout joy and sing."**

**Psalm 69:34** **"Let heaven and earth praise Him, the seas and all that move in them."**

**Psalm 98:4** **"Shout for joy to the Lord, all the**

**earth, burst into jubilant song with music."**

**Psalm 148:7-10, 13a** **"Praise the Lord from the earth, you great sea creatures and all ocean depths, lightning and hail, snow and clouds, stormy winds that do His bidding, you mountains and hills, fruit trees and all cedars, wild animals and all cattle, small creatures and flying birds...Let them praise the Lord."**

**Isaiah 44:23** **"Sing for joy, O heavens, for the Lord has done this; shout aloud, O earth beneath. Burst into song, you mountains, you forests and all your trees, for the Lord has redeemed Jacob, He displays His glory in Israel."**

**Why does the earth and all that is in it rejoice?**

David tells us it is because the Lord reigns. He is in command of it. He rules it. He reigns over it. He is in control of it. As I have said, it stands to reason that if He created it, He rules it. He is both the Creator and Sustainer. No wonder creation rejoices.

When we read **Genesis 1**, we note that after every day of creation in which God spoke that what He said came into existence and said that it was good. From His perspective as the all-powerful, creative God, He couldn't do any better and didn't need to do anything else. From fields and forests or flocks of feathered birds or animals that abound on land or the fish in the sea, all rejoice because God is in control – He reigns.

But from the perspective of some who look around at the chaos in the world, they have concluded that God either isn't as all-powerful as the Bible claims Him to be or He is a vacant landlord, having abandoned it long ago to let the earth fend for itself. Civil unrest aside, just looking at nature alone things seem to be out of control. Destructive flooding from severe hurricanes, powerful tornadoes ripping everything apart in its deadly path, wildfires consuming thousands of acres, damaging earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, harsh drought or brutal winters make many wonder about God's seeming lack of control or His absence.

But such conclusions are misplaced and unfounded. From the vantage point of the earth, it understands that the Lord reigns and it offers Him praise. We saw last week from **Psalm 96:10** that it is to be proclaimed among the nations **“the Lord reigns.”**

It may appear that He either doesn't know what He is doing, that He has lost control, or that He doesn't care but those and other false notions couldn't be further from the truth. The Lord reigns. The earth has it right – it is glad, and it rejoices because He is in command of it.

The second reason the earth rejoices is because of God's character.

## **B. The Earth Rejoices Because of God's Character – vv. 2-7**

Notice first His appearance.

### **1. His appearance – v. 2a**

The psalmist describes God as being surrounded by clouds and thick darkness. This is a picture of how awesome His judgement will be. Keil and Delitzsch add: **“God's enshrouding Himself in darkness bears witness to His judicial earnestness.”**

Notes from my study Bible remind us that **“The dark storm clouds that hide the sun and cast a veil across the sky are dramatic visual reminders that the fierce heat and brilliance of God's naked glory must be veiled from creaturely eyes. Thus also a curtain closed off the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle and temple, veiling it in darkness.”**

**Exodus 10:21** records the ninth plague that fell on Egypt. It was the plague of darkness that spread throughout the land, described as a darkness that could be felt. It was God's judgment on their sun-god, Ra. Some scholars have suggested that this was nothing more than a sandstorm that swept through the land since previous plagues had left the land a desolate wasteland stripped of its vegetation. A sandstorm would be felt and seen. Yet the account tells us that this plague lasted three days. It is possible that God used a natural event in a supernatural way to further decimate the land and

bring judgment against the nation and against their false gods. God uses natural forces in supernatural ways with the other plagues like frogs and locusts, but I think his was a supernatural event, otherwise Moses would have said it was a sand storm.

Consider that what is described as clouds and thick darkness as not only a physical phenomenon, but also a spiritual darkness that had shrouded the spiritual hearts of those who reject God.

I get that idea when we see Luke's account of the crucifixion in his gospel (**23:44-45a**). As Jesus hung on the cross, Luke describes the scene with a darkness that covered the whole land from the sixth hour to the ninth hour and adds that the sun stopped shining. This was more than a mere solar eclipse as some want to explain it away, because the accounts indicated that darkness lasted for three hours. Its purpose was perhaps twofold. One, to symbolize the judgment of God on the darkness of sin, which Christ took on Himself as He hung on the cross. The other was perhaps to hide the world from the wrath God was pouring out on Jesus for our sin.

Moses reminded the Israelites as they stood before Mt. Horeb that God came to them in black clouds and deep darkness to speak to them, while the mountain blazed with fire (**Deuteronomy 4:9-14**).

When Solomon dedicated the Temple, we read: **“When the priest withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled His temple. Then Solomon said, ‘the Lord has said that He would dwell in a dark cloud.’”** (**I Kings 8:10-12**)

At the Transfiguration (**Luke 9:34**), a cloud covered Jesus, Peter, James and John causing the three disciples to be afraid. Through the cloud, the voice of God was heard commending His Son to them.

Physical clouds and darkness are a way of symbolizing God's presence and His judgment. The earth rejoices because of His appearance, but then it also rejoices because of His authority.

## 2. His authority – vv. 2b-7

First of all, let's understand that the psalmist refers to God's authority as stemming from His throne. When we speak of His throne, we automatically think of God and His character. His throne is the place of His rule, His authority. The psalmist says that the foundation or basis or substance of God's authority is His righteousness and His justice.

### a. God's righteousness

The dictionary defines righteous as being virtuous, honorable, or morally right. The Bible uses different words for righteous.

1. Just, innocent, in the right, devout, upright
2. Honesty, justice, justness
3. Accuracy, what is correct, honest, always doing what is right, equity or fairness

It's important to keep in mind that *righteousness isn't something God does, but something God is*. Righteousness is a part of His character. Because His character is righteous, He will always act that way because He must remain true to His nature. What He does is always right because that is who He is. **Malachi 3:6** reminds us that He is God, and He does not change. It's the same in **Nu. 23:19**.

**Psalm 9:4** says God is the righteous judge.

**Psalm 9:8** says God rules with righteousness and judges with fairness.

**Isaiah 11:5** says God's righteousness is like a belt and His faithfulness is like a sash around His waist. As a belt and sash are important parts of clothing, so God's righteousness and faithfulness are important parts of His character.

When Scripture speaks of His righteous right hand, it refers to exercising His power and authority in a just or right way.

In **Psalm 19:1** where we read that **"the heaven's declare the glory of God"**, it's another way of saying that they proclaim His righteousness. And jumping ahead to **verse 6** where we read that **"the heavens proclaim His righteousness, and all the peoples see His glory"** refers to the general revelation of God through nature. No one is without

excuse in understanding the existence of God.

### Romans 1:18-20

Creation clearly displays the existence of God so that no one has an excuse not to know Him. His holy justice is being revealed even now as God abandons the wicked to their sin. His wrath isn't just reserved for end times but is meted out many even now. But there is coming a day when His eternal wrath will be revealed and everyone will see the glory of His righteousness.

Righteousness is one characteristic of His throne. The other characteristic of His throne is His justice.

### b. God's justice

Justice is defined as the quality of being righteous; the use of authority and power to uphold what is right, just, or lawful; impartiality and fairness.

Justice is one of God's attributes and comes out of His holiness. Both terms, righteousness and justice, are often used together. One author noted that **"since righteousness is the quality or character of being right or just, it is another attribute of God and incorporates both His righteousness and holiness."**

If we are going to understand God's Justice, we need to first understand sin.

According to **I John 3:4**, sin is lawlessness.

In passages like **Daniel 9:4-5; Micah 2:1; and James 3:6**, sin is called iniquity. **Romans 6:23** also describes sin as going our own way. (**Isaiah 53:6**)

Sin is anything that is contrary to God and His holiness. Sin offends God and because it is an insult to a holy God, His justice demands a penalty, the penalty being death and separation from God (**Romans 1:18-32; 2:5; 3:23**).

In an act of both love and justice, God sent His Son Jesus Christ to pay the penalty for our sin to provide salvation for those who believe (**Rom 5:8-11; 6:23; John 1:12; 3:15-17; 20:31; I Peter 2:24; 3:18**).

God's own righteousness is given to sinners who accept Christ as Savior as a gift as part of His grace based on our faith (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). This does not overlook His justice but is given as a response to



His justice. As our substitute on the cross, Jesus satisfied the justice of God who then because of our faith gave us His grace, His righteousness.

But there is a day in the future, when the Lord's return will demand that His justice be meted out on those who refused this gift. As we looked at last week, we long to see justice for things that are happening around us that don't seem to get the punishment they deserve now. The Lord will pour out His justice to make things right including His justice given to those who rejected His gift of salvation. There is coming a day when His righteousness and justice will be on full display.

The psalmist describes God's justice in four ways.

1. His justice is swift
2. His justice is fair
3. His justice is holy
4. His justice is shaming

If you have ever seen a wildfire, you know how swift it moves consuming everything in its path. Nothing escapes. That is the swiftness of His fire as it consumes all His foes in judgment.

Because of His holiness or righteousness, there will be a fairness to His justice. He sets the standard and all His enemies will be judged by that standard. Being benevolent or showing kindness or exercising religious zeal will not alter His justice.

God's righteousness and justice walk hand in hand as He sits on His throne in authority. And all the earth will see His glory and proclaim that He is right in what He does. Those who have followed false gods will be put to shame because they will realize that the idols they have followed are not gods at all. They will acknowledge that there is only one God and be ashamed for following what is false

Summing it up, Warren Wiersbe writes: "His judgments bring Him glory and manifest His holiness to a godless world."

**"The Lord reigns, let the earth be glad; let the distant shores rejoice...righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne."**

It is true what the chorus says: "He's got the whole

world in His hands." That is a great reason for thanksgiving, and the earth is glad and rejoices.

The psalmist zooms in closer and in the next verses describes how Zion rejoices.

## II. IT IS A CALL FOR ZION TO REJOICE – vv. 8-9

Zion was originally inhabited by the Jebusites. Even under Caleb's leadership, the tribe of Judah could not oust its occupants from that fortress city until King David conquered it.

In the Old Testament, Zion refers to the city of Jerusalem, sometimes called David's city and under his rule it became the capital of Israel.

Prophetically, Zion will have prominence in the Millennial Kingdom, and will continue to be the capital city of Israel during Christ's earthly reign.

### Psalm 132:11-18

Revelation speaks of Zion as the Heavenly City or the New Jerusalem, the eternal city where the Church, the body of Christ will be received.

In **verse 8**, we see first that Zion rejoices because God's appraisal is true.

### A. Zion Rejoices Because God's Appraisal Is True – v. 8

Zion has heard that the Lord reigns in righteousness and with justice. Because His judgments are right, Zion responds with joy.

Charles Spurgeon writes "While the heathen are confounded, the people of God are made to triumph, for they love to see their God exalted. The day shall come when the literal Zion, so long forsaken, shall joy in the common salvation."

Zion will be glad to see that false religions and those who worship them will be put to shame. They will be judged fairly and rightly because God's appraisal of them is true. Since His judgments are just, fair, right and holy, Zion will hear and be glad and it will rejoice. God's appraisal is true.

They will also rejoice because His acclaim is true.

## B. Zion Rejoices Because God's Acclaim Is True – v. 9

The world will bow before the Lord, the God who is Most High, the One to whom every knee will bow. As the psalmist says, He is over all the earth, even over anything or anyone that sets itself up as God.

Charles Spurgeon says that since there is but one God, there cannot be another. He is above all and there is coming a day when everyone will understand that truth and they will give Him the glory He deserves.

He deserves our praise because He is worthy of it. **Revelation 4:11** says He is worthy to receive glory and honor and power because He created all things and adds that it was by His will we were created.

Among the 10 commandments given to Moses by God, **Exodus 20:3-5** says that we aren't to have any carved images of anything in the heavens or the earth. God continues by saying that He is a jealous God, not a jealousy that is sinful that stems from pride, but rather a jealousy that is righteous and can't allow glory that should be given to Him, given to someone or something else.

Solomon certainly understood this when he dedicated the Temple acknowledging glory be given to the Lord.

**I Chronicles 29:11** “Yours, O God, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the majesty and the splendor, for everything in heaven and earth is Yours. Yours, O Lord, is the kingdom; You are exalted as head over all. Wealth and honor come from You; You are the ruler of all things. In Your hands are strength and power to exalt and give strength to all. Now, our God, we give you thanks, and praise Your glorious name.”

Somewhere along the way, Solomon forgot that and stopped praising God and set up physical idols and idols in his heart, idols that took the place of God. The sounds of praise ceased among the streets of Zion. But one day, the sounds of praise and thanksgiving will echo through its streets and in its homes. God reigns and deserves praise in Zion.

And that brings us to the close of this Psalm where we see that it is a call for the righteous to rejoice.

## III. IT IS A CALL FOR THE RIGHTEOUS TO REJOICE – vv. 10-12

There are a couple reasons here why the righteous rejoice.

### A. They Rejoice Because of God's Protection – v. 10

### B. They Rejoice Because of God's Peace – v. 11-12

If you take time to read the little information on the prayer sheet for countries to pray for, most of them remind us of the persecution that exists in those places. Believers are targeted for their faith. They lose their jobs, they lose their homes, they lose their families, many lose their lives. With such atrocities, you might wonder how God protects or guards the faithful, how He delivers them from the hands of the wicked when it seems like He doesn't.

While persecution is often physical or emotional in some way, their persecutors can never take one thing from them. It is something God protects. They can never take their spiritual life, their eternal destiny. The spiritual darkness they were once in has been removed by God's light that has been shed abroad in their heart.

Notice why the Lord protects them and gives them peace. It is because they choose to hate evil (**Romans 12:9**). They have chosen to walk in obedience. If we love God who is holy, then we will hate what is evil. When we turn from what is evil, we have reason to be thankful. We have reason to rejoice, to be glad. The righteous have good reason to praise God's holy name. Sing with me:

Rejoice, ye pure in heart;  
Rejoice, give thanks, and sing.  
Your festal banner wave on high –  
The cross of Christ, your King.  
Rejoice, rejoice,  
Rejoice, give thanks and sing!

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Because the Lord reigns, we have reason to rejoice. That's a day we look forward to.