

## ***Nine Psalms: Royal Psalm 98***

### ***Introduction:***

Well, People of God. Today is one of those days for me where it feels like it's been forever since we've been together, like all sorts of life has happened. But it's been only a week, nothing more. It's a weird thing, you know?

Today we're talking about Psalm 98. This is part of our walk through a handful of Psalms that both stand-in for types we see throughout the Book of Psalms, and also have something to say to us just as they are.

On its face, it might seem like there's not much for Psalm 98 to say to us, or we might think so. But it's a rich song of praise.

I hope today, more than anything else, we're able to talk about the principles that Psalm 98 gives voice to, I hope that we can see the long-game God has been playing, and I hope we can realize the power we have in the world to embody and practice the justice of God.

### ***Prayer:***

#### ***"Royal Psalms" & Psalm 98:***

Today's passage is taken from a group of psalms that are called, together, the "Royal Psalms." They make up a small chunk of the Book of Psalms, Psalms 93-99. They sometimes get called "enthronement psalms," because they talk in unusually strong terms about how

God is King over Israel. They look forward to a time when the whole world will realize it, and will realize that in fact God is King over the Gentile nations, too. We don't know when they were written, but maybe around the same time Isaiah 40 through 55 was, because there's similar language and theme about how impressive God is, about what God will do in the future, about how God will be seen in all creation (cf. NIB, McCann Jr., 1996, 1053). They are psalms about how God's faithfulness, as the good king of all creation, is guaranteed.

And Psalm 98 follows suit. I love Psalm 98; I loved it the first time I read it, because it's subtitled "A Psalm" and I just really appreciate stating the obvious.

It, though, doesn't state the obvious. That is, as a Psalm it looks forward to a time when God will do something that hasn't quite happened yet. It calls for great praise, it uses hebrew words for salvation, one author calls it a "Joy to The World" psalm (ibid., 1072). And it is.

### ***Justice, Righteousness, Justified, etc.:***

We've talked about a basic translation problem a hundred times in the years I've been here. It's the idea that justice, righteousness, and their related words share the same root in Hebrew and Greek, "justified" and "made righteous" are the same word. But in English the words justice and righteousness don't share a same root, they come from different words. To be declared righteous is to be justified; to translate it

one way or another as far as the Hebrew or Greek goes, makes no difference. But in English because these words are loaded, things get wonky when we try to make sense of what God's People are meant to do and be, what God does for us; this all gets even messier when we talk about Jesus.

For biblical authors, righteousness was an idea that only made sense in the context of God's relationship with Israel; it wasn't a virus you could pass around, or a gas you could breathe in, or, hmmm, a feeling. It was, oh, a way of life. It made no sense outside God's covenant relationship with Israel.

God's righteousness was God's ongoing commitment to be faithful to the covenant promises He made with Israel. A righteous person was someone who was living faithfully to the demands of the covenant God made with Israel. And God's righteousness was different than ours, of course, because God invited humanity into covenant with Him, not the other way around.

All this has major implications for how we understand what it means to live righteously, or as justified people--same thing--this side of Christ. It influences how we read and interpret Scripture.

This is all relevant for the Royal Psalms, too, because of course, because when God's People

This comes up in today's Psalm, too.

## ***Psalm 98: Translation Messes***

We've read from the Common English Bible today, not the NIV translation that we usually read from. In the CEB, as it's called, the last verses of the psalm are read this way:

***8 Let all the rivers clap their hands;  
let the mountains rejoice out loud altogether  
9 before the Lord  
because he is coming to establish justice on  
the earth!  
He will establish justice in the world rightly;  
he will establish justice among all people  
fairly.***

The NIV reads this way, and it's very different:

***Let the rivers clap their hands,  
let the mountains sing together for joy;  
9 let them sing before the Lord,  
for he comes to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world in righteousness  
and the peoples with equity.***

We've talked about it before. For now let's just remember that justified, righteousness –righteousified-- are covenant terms, only make sense in the context of God and Israel's relationship.

Does God come to “establish justice” on the earth or “judge the earth?” Does he “establish justice...rightly” or “judge the world in righteousness?”

Both these translations are fair. They are both legitimate, given the words they are translating. But I think if it's the NIV that we're reading from, we lose a, *if not the*, really significant point that the author of the psalm is making.

We read about judgment and righteousness and immediately go to Jesus, to salvation, to decisions to follow Christ and Jesus' return. We read this is a reminder that God judges sin.

And that's kinda not great, it short-circuits our thinking, and causes us to give the psalm such a Christian spin that we forget it's first a Jewish song.

And it's a song about how God is coming to establish justice on earth and establish it rightly. It's a covenant song.

### ***Psalm 98: A Covenant Song***

For an Israelite, the covenant God made with Israel gave insight into how to be human, right? What God meant humans to be was seen when they lived faithfully to the covenant God made with them, lived out the requirements of Torah. Jesus summarized--or affirmed the summary--of these Covenant Demands as " "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' ""

There was no way to be righteous outside Israel, no

way to be as fully human as people were meant to be.

And this is a prayer, a praise, a covenant song about how God will do in the world what He's done in Israel. It's a song about how God is coming to establish the covenant everywhere, and in doing so do two things: Prove God is who God says God is, that is, prove God is creator, sustainer, has king-like rights over all the earth, and also, reveal what justice really is. Because of course, the relationship God has with Israel, the special covenant relationship, is the context for justice, for righteousness; the best anyone can do outside that relationship is peer in, and try to model Israel's faithful way of life.

### ***How?***

And the proof that this is going to happen is that God has vindicated Israel. As far as the Psalmist is concerned, what is going to get the world's attention is that God kept his promises to Israel. Just as God vindicates Israel, proclaims the psalmist, the whole world will realize what God has been up to:

***Sing to the Lord a new song***

***because he has done wonderful things!***

***His own strong hand and his own holy arm***

***have won the victory!***

***2 The Lord has made his salvation widely known;***

***he has revealed his righteousness***

***in the eyes of all the nations.***

***3 God has remembered his loyal love***

***and faithfulness to the house of Israel;  
every corner of the earth has seen our God's  
salvation.***

***Triumphalistic, Prophetic, Hopeful, What?***

It's hard to say when this Psalm was written. It's very likely that it was written after some great vindication of Israel over her national enemies, some long, long time ago. The Psalmist looked out and saw others paying tribute and knew that God was beginning something.

But the truth is that that beginning that they saw, it didn't pan out, not really. There was no great realization upon the whole face of the earth about what it meant to follow God. Jesus, of course, opened up the covenant of God to everyone, Jew, Greek, Male and Female, slave or free, and even though we who are God's People have spread out all over the face of the earth, we haven't seen the establishment of justice the way the Psalmist expected to see it. We haven't seen the arrival of what the Psalmist expected to happen any minute.

In fact, Revelation, which says all sorts of things about all sorts of things, most of them tied to first century Rome, promises still, to us, that God is coming. Jesus is called "the one who is, who was, and who is coming." We're still in the middle of expectation and arrival, and wondering when God will arrive.

***This Side of Jesus:***

So, in the end, we're left with this Psalm that looks forward to some great, total vindication, so total that creation itself takes part. The psalmist expects God to arrive, and when God does, to spread out the justice-making covenant He has with Israel throughout the whole world.

Now, we'd say that Jesus was a part of this, of course. And more than a part, it's key and lock both: Jesus opened God's covenant up to everyone, the Spirit was loosed upon all kinds of people, we've been given more resources to live faithfully for God than any Psalmist could have imagined.

This side of Jesus our expectations aren't so much different from the Psalmist's, as they are deeper and wider. We understand, in a way the Psalmist couldn't, how trusting Jesus helps us become a part of God's People. If God was coming to "establish justice among all people fairly," as the Psalm puts it, we could talk, maybe, about how Jesus reveals to us just what God demands of his Covenant People. We could talk about Jesus' great summary of the Law, and how what we look forward to, in Christ, is a day when everyone loves their neighbor as themselves, and loves God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. We are still waiting for Jesus to

What Psalm 98 doesn't talk about at all is the way God's People will have a role in establishing justice; what the Psalmist couldn't consider is the fact that God's own Spirit would be given people, giving them



power.

And it's true that where the Church has grown up, natively, without forceful conversions or societal oppression--and miraculously, even then--it has often been an advocate of the law of love that Jesus gives God's People, visiting those who are sick and in prison, feeding the hungry, satiating the thirsty, living in solidarity with the orphan, and the widow, and the poor and, generally, doing Jesus stuff in Jesus' name.

### ***Psalm 98: Confusion:***

But we can get confused when it comes to justice. One gift that Psalm 98 offers us is an invitation to consider what justice really is.

We talk about justice as if it's mercy's opposite, right? Justice is the opposite of mercy. Justice has to do with getting what you deserve. Justice is transactional. Before God covenanted with Israel, justice was unequal; you accidentally killed my child, I'm going to purposefully kill your tribe. God's covenant with Israel lowered the bar, limited the "mob justice," as we call it, that humanity ran with: Torah demanded that justice become equal: An eye for an eye, instead of an eye for a body, a steer for a steer, instead of a steer for a household, farmyard. Jesus, of course, upended this for those who are God's People. He told us:

***"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the***

***right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.***

***43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”***

Psalm 98 invites us to remember that justice, for God's people, acting with mercy, with forgiveness in this life. If justice is a transaction, forgiveness is the opposite of one. It's writing off a debt. To forgive is the hardest thing, because to forgive means you absorb the costs that you're forgiving, it means the loss stays on your books, stays in your heart--until, of course, we take up God's unending offer of peace and healing, and find it. Forgiveness doesn't zero things out, right? Do we get this? If I say to you, "All is forgiven." What I'm saying

is, "I'm going to bear the costs of what you did, rather than make you pay me back. The costs are real. But you don't owe me." We can't forgive, can't show mercy, unless we realize that every act of forgiveness is an act of bearing the costs ourselves, of not demanding payback, whether that's financial payback, or some meager replacement for the emotional and spiritual costs that we bear.

I'm beating this into the ground because, frankly, for me this was incredibly empowering to own. To forgive means that I bear the costs of your sin against me. I take on the costs, not you. To pray either, "And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors." or "Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us." is to pray dangerously, because it invites God to use our standards and behavior as his own in dealing with us.

A Christian is someone who doesn't get what they deserve, who doesn't receive justice as the world reckons it, but instead receives mercy, justice redefined by Jesus. And to pray to be forgiven as we forgive means I must position my life in such a way that I can get close enough to God and Christians who love me to pass along those costs so I don't have to bear them alone, can find strength to heal.

Justice is the opposite of mercy, in the world. But for Christians, this side of Jesus' redefinition of what it means to be just, to be righteous, to be faithful covenant partners of God--justice means mercy,

forgiveness. The covenant God made with humanity began by limiting justice, as the world defined it, and then Jesus turned it on its head, and we ourselves, in Jesus' power, in every place where we live like Jesus lived, and pray, "Father forgive them," we are doing the very thing the psalmist expected God to do, I think.

The greatest power the Holy Spirit gives us is-- hyperbole much? whatever--the greatest power the Holy Spirit gives us is the power to turn justice into mercy. It's holy alchemy, it's rocks into gold, it's unbelievable.

And when the psalmist sings out that God is coming to establish justice, that God will do it rightly, what we've got to realize is that we're the ones God is doing it through until Christ returns. In every place where we turn the world's idea of justice on its head, and instead, we ourselves God's People don't demand to be repaid what we owe, don't demand to get what we deserve, we're spreading out the covenant way of life that the Psalmist looked forward to. We're living up to Jesus' law of love, his summary of how a faithful covenant partner of God should live.

Psalm 98 reminds me, at least, that the age of retribution is over, payback is done, and to live for God this side of Christ is to lean into the Holy Spirit. We expect forgiveness from God, the release from all our debts. We expect God to eat the costs of our sins, because there is no zeroing them out. And we, in turn,

demand no retribution from those who wrong us, and demand, as His children, that God give us strength to bear the costs that forgiveness requires.

Any place this happens, anyplace the Church does what it is made to do, is closer to heaven than every place where justice or payback or retribution are still in play.

***A note on harvesting:***

I don't meant to say, in any of this, that we don't reap what we sow. There are effects of our behaviors. I will not throw my pearls before swine, and I will not entrust my heart, soul, body, or strength to those who will misuse me. You shouldn't either. To forgive is not to invite another person to hurt you; it is to invite yourself not to hurt them, even though they deserve it.

The Church, in our deep, earnest desire to be kind, has offered people up to abusers, dehumanizers, and betrayers as cattle are offered up a slaughterhouse ramp. To forgive does not mean to allow another to do unto us the sin they have done unto us a thousand times. That's Hell made its most real. And we must reject it. Nor does it mean that our actions have no repercussions in the world or in our relationships; the truth is that they always do.

***Conclusion:***

We must have the strength of Christ to bear the costs that forgiveness asks of us. We have to have the

strength of love to love. The Spirit and the Church bear us up; their solidarity with us help us absorb what we ourselves can't bear alone. If nothing else, they help us keep still until we can forgive, when any action would do nothing but harm us further.

The terrible truth of retribution is that it doesn't make anything better. Justice as we so often think of it is a fiction. Killing someone because they killed someone doesn't bring the first back to life. Stealing someone's time because they stole and sold your watch doesn't return your watch, or the time that you lost while it was gone from you. Justice as we so often reckon it is utterly and totally impersonal, because it implies that everything can be evaluated objectively, and death, loss, fear, harassment, anything that causes us emotional, psychological, physical pain--anything that destroys our heart, soul, mind, or strength--can never be objectified. Justice as we often reckon it believes anything can equal anything else; but sins against us can't be evaluated against cash or time. Our hearts are priceless. These things of ours are priceless, priceless. Tell me what the heartache of a child is worth? Crime and punishment are measured in units. You can't measure the infinite against the finite. The scales won't ever balance. This is why, of course, it doesn't gain a person anything to gain the world and lose their soul in the process.

So: Anything you do to me, because I am alive, and a person, made in the image of God, remade in the image of Christ, anything you do to me you cannot pay

back to me. No sin against my heart, soul, mind, or strength can be made right by your punishment. In the end, I've got to eat the costs of it, the costs are mine to bear, and your punishment will not undo your crime. The only option, really, is owning this truth, living into it, and giving out the same mercy and forgiveness we claim for ourselves. That is justice, as Jesus defines it. It's the economics of love. When Christ who is coming, who is on his way, returns, we'll realize this, all the world will realize it. Until then, here and there in the world the Church forgives, shows the justice of love, and demands no retribution, and God's Kingdom shines bright in that place and time.

I wonder how bright we are shining here, and in the places we go from here? Do we communicate Joy to the world?