

Sing to the LORD

Psalm 96

We are taking a short break from our study of 2 Chronicles this afternoon to look at Psalm 96. As we sang this Psalm recently I noticed that the word “Lord” in the title and in stanzas 1 and 2 was spelled “Lord,” not “LORD” in all caps, indicating the divine name.

I wrote to the editors regarding this Psalm. I pointed out that this is the only setting of Psalm 96 in the book, and it is a good one—useful, singable, memorable, one that we want our people to use over and over.

The title is “Sing to the Lord, Sing His Praise.” “The Lord” is the divine name (יהוה), though the formatting does not make this clear. Remarkably, the divine name is used 11 times in this relatively short Psalm. Apart from the word “Jehovah” in stanza 4, there is no indication that the Psalm is addressed to Yahweh. (“Jehovah” and “Yahweh” are both transliterations of the divine name.)

I proposed that the editors change “Lord” in the title, stanzas 1 and 2 to “LORD,” as is done multiple times in the TPH. This would alert singers that יהוה is the one addressed in the Psalm.

I received a response which said in part, “Thank you for . . . the proposed changes, which, upon a quick glance, seem to be sound and helpful. We will take this under advisement.” This was encouraging.

As I studied Psalm 96 I got very excited about its message. Clearly it is a song. Let’s identify five appropriate descriptions.

1. A praise song

Consider with me the opening words of the Psalm: שִׁירוּ לַיהוָה שִׁיר הַקָּדָשׁ – Sing to the LORD a new song. In grammar, “song” is the cognate accusative of “Sing”: “Sing a song,” as in the nursery rhyme “Sing a song of sixpence.” “Sing” is a verb; “song” is a noun—same consonants; only the vowel changes.

It’s the same in Hebrew: “Sing (שִׁירוּ) a song (שִׁיר).” “Sing” is plural; it’s for the whole congregation—the whole body of God’s people. God wants us all to sing with the congregation, whether we think we have a good voice or not. The church’s music is not supposed to be a performance but should involve the whole congregation.

Psalm 96 is a song sung to the LORD (יהוה). The word יהוה is God’s personal name, in contrast to a title; his title is “God,” his name is “Yahweh.”

As I stated in a recent sermon, here is the difference between “the God who is,” contrasted with all the false gods of the nations, who aren’t—who don’t exist! The Psalmist’s maxim is apropos: “For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens” (Ps. 96:5). The LORD who made the heavens is real—he exists—whereas, the gods of the peoples are idols: “worthless idols” (ESV). Why are they worthless? Because they do not exist! They cannot hear or answer prayer,

they cannot protect, they cannot save. This is a significant difference indeed! This is not the difference between a Ford and a Chevrolet, or a Democrat and a Republican. Some people have strong opinions about cars, or about politics; they will wax eloquent about why they prefer a Ford over a Chevy, or vice versa. But when it comes to God, we're not talking about the difference between two gods who both exist, who both have power to save, who both can answer prayer—one “Brand A” and the other “Brand B.” No! There is only one God who exists, who is real. False idols exist only in peoples’ imaginations.

Psalm 96 is a song sung to the true God, the LORD (יהוה). This is the God worshiped by the true church of Jesus Christ, and by no one else. The church sings to the true God, who reveals himself as Yahweh, and who sent his Son as our Savior. The church sings its praise in worship. Here, then, is a praise song; it is also

2. A trinitarian song

The word “Oh” was added by the translators to indicate that the verb “Sing” is imperative (a command). It can just as well be omitted. In this case it would be translated “*Sing to the LORD a new song! Sing to the LORD, all the earth. Sing to the LORD, bless His name.*” Notice that “Sing to the LORD” is repeated three times. Three times the church is urged to “Sing to the LORD.” This shows how important it is—this is the proper business of the church.

But this is not all: we have the pattern again in the thrice-repeated phrase “Give to the LORD” (vv. 7–8): הָבֵי לַיהוָה (from יָהֵב *give*)¹: “*Give to the LORD, O families of the peoples, give to the LORD glory and strength. Give to the LORD the glory due His name.*”

Here, then, are “Sing to the LORD” and “Give to the LORD”—two sets of three identical imperative verbs with the same direct object (יהוה the LORD): Let the rhythm sink in: “Sing to the LORD . . . Sing to the LORD . . . Sing to the LORD,” followed by “Give to the LORD . . . Give to the LORD . . . Give to the LORD”—three oblique (implied) references to the Trinity. Surely this is intentional! God is trying to teach us something. What we have here is what Gill describes as “*the trinity of Persons, Father, Son, and Spirit, the one only Jehovah, to whom the new song of salvation is to be sung.*”² All three Persons of the Trinity have a part in our salvation: the Father conceived the plan of salvation in eternity past, the Son effected it at his coming, and the Spirit applies it in real time, effectually calling the elect to faith at the divinely-appointed time. The Father chose a people for himself in eternity past; the Son became flesh to purchase our salvation; the Spirit regenerates the elect and gives them a heart to know Christ. As the church sings: “Holy, holy, holy! Merciful and mighty! God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.”

So here is a praise song, a trinitarian song; thirdly, it is

¹ BDB יהֵב (Logos Bible Software)

² John Gill, *Exposition of the Entire Bible* (Pocket Bible)

3. An evangelistic song

“Proclaim the good news of His salvation from day to day” (v. 2b). The verb is translated “proclaim the good news”; the word translated “salvation” is literally “Jesus” (יְשׁוּעָה), meaning “Jehovah saves.” The name “Jesus” comes from the Old Testament Joshua (יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן-נוּן Joshua the son of Nun). This is the name that God himself assigned to the holy infant. As the angel told Joseph: “thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). The gospel is the story of Jesus.

Here is the message that all the world so desperately needs to hear. We live at a time of “wars and rumors of war,” when men are “hateful, and hating one another.”³ Armies are intentionally targeting innocent people, contrary to the sixth commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” which forbids “all taking away the life of ourselves, or of others, except in case of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense” (LC 136). There are many problems in the world, and all of them can be traced to one thing: sin in the human heart. People need the gospel!

A praise song, a trinitarian song, an evangelistic song; also

4. A missionary song

“Give to the LORD, O *families* of the *peoples*, give to the LORD glory and strength. Give to the LORD the glory due His name; bring an offering, and come into His courts. Oh, worship the LORD in the beauty of holiness! Tremble before Him, all the earth. Say among the *nations*, ‘The LORD reigns; the world also is firmly established, it shall not be moved; He shall judge the *peoples* righteously’” (vv. 7–10).

Notice the terms: “Families . . . peoples . . . nations . . . peoples.” In the eternal plan of God the gospel came first to Abraham and the Hebrews. But it was God’s plan all along that the light of the Gospel would, through the witness of the Jews, go to the Gentiles as well. Consider the following Scriptures:

“Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him: he shall bring forth judgment to the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:1).

“I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles” (Isa. 42:6).

“It is a light thing that thou shouldest be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give thee for a light to the Gentiles, that thou mayest be my salvation unto the end of the earth” (Isa. 49:6).

How the early Jewish disciples in the book of Acts missed this is amazing. They were so glad to be the chosen people that they forgot that God was going to call the

³ Tit. 3:3

Gentiles too. At the final day the church will be composed of men and women from every kingdom, tribe, tongue and nation. It will be a beautiful sight.

A praise song, a trinitarian song, an evangelistic song, a missionary song; fifth,
5. A universal song

Verses 11–12 speak of “the heavens,” “the sea,” “the field,” and “the trees of the woods.” “Woods” could also be rendered “thicket” or “wilderness.”⁴ The psalmist longs for “a transformation of creation at the coming of Yahweh, in which even the jungle and thicket will have a share.”⁵ Consider these two references from Isaiah that speak to this theme:

“Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it! Shout, you lower parts of the earth; break forth into singing, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the LORD has redeemed Jacob, and glorified Himself in Israel” (Isa. 44:23).

“For you shall go out with joy, and be led out with peace; the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing before you, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands” (Isa. 55:12).

When man sinned, he was driven from the Garden of Eden. “The LORD sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. . . . he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Gen. 3).

But in the book of Revelation Eden is restored: God says, “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7).

“Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city” (Rev. 22:14).

The salvation Christ has purchased is comprehensive: God will save every one of his elect people. He will also restore the creation and bring his people into his blessed presence forevermore.

So it is fitting that we should sing Psalm 96. It is a praise song, a trinitarian song, an evangelistic song, a missionary song, a universal song. May God grant us the grace to sing it from the heart to his praise eternally. Amen!

⁴ BDB: עֵרְבַת wood, forest, thicket (Logos Bible Software)

⁵ *Expositors Bible Commentary*, citing C. Houtman (Pocket Bible)