

7) THE LORD IS KING (PSALM 99)

What or who rules your life and mine? Where do we give our loyalty and devotion? Younger generations have great difficulty with anyone or anything that claims total authority. Yet many of the psalms proclaim that "the Lord is king."

PRAISING GOD AS KING

Psalm 99 is one of a number of psalms to use "the Lord is King" as a key theme. This psalm is most likely a hymn, and one of a group of psalms known as "enthronement psalms." Other examples include: 47, 93, 95-99.

The idea of God as some cosmic monarch is a common idea in near eastern religions. The Lord is King is a call to all peoples to stand in awe, submit and worship.

GOD IS A MANY-SPLENDURED KING

Under the umbrella concept of King, many metaphors for God are used in the Psalter.

1) God is King means God is the creator who rules over chaos. For ancient peoples, chaos was symbolized by the unruly force of water. Thus, much of God's activity in creation dealt with taming and delimiting the seas. E.g. ps. 93:4: "More majestic than the thunders of mighty waters, more majestic than the waves of the sea, majestic on high is the Lord!" God's control over all is an important mark of divine kingship.

2) A second set of metaphors focus on God as protector. Under this heading may be included metaphors such as "shepherd", "refuge" "warrior", and "judge." E.g. ps. 98:1b-2: "His right hand and his holy arm have gotten him victory. The Lord has made known his victory; he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations."

PSALM 99 IN GREATER DETAIL

There are 3 parts to the psalm – 1-3, 4-5, 6-9 - with clear breaks to indicate the end of each part ("Holy is he" – vs 3, 5, 9).

vs1-3: consists in declarations and calls for response.

The Lord is king;

let the peoples tremble!

He sits enthroned upon the cherubim;

let the earth quake!

The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all peoples.

Let them praise your great and awesome name.

Holy is he!

The "cherubim" were creatures that adorned the top of the ark of the covenant (ornate chest that originally carried the ten commandments given by God to Moses).

These creatures were thought to support God's throne. The locale of this throne and the ark was Zion or Jerusalem (God's holy mountain, v.9). This was believed to be the centre of the earth (Ezekiel 5:5, Ps. 48) from which God ruled the whole world.

Vs. 4-5 – God as Righteous Judge

v.4 addresses God as a lover of justice who has established equity, executed justice and righteousness in Jacob (another word for Israel, e.g. Genesis 35: 9-15). God is a judge without corruption or partiality like earthly kings, and therefore it is fitting that God is judge over the whole world (ps.96,98).

v.5 is a responsive call to vs. 4. Because God is a righteous Judge over all, therefore we are called to extol and to worship. This section ends once again with the declaration: "Holy is he!"

Vs. 6-9 – God is one who answers the call of those who trust in God. In Israel's helplessness, represented by their leaders – Moses and Aaron and Samuel – God provided protection and guidance. But with the privilege of having God's protection and guidance also comes the responsibility of following God's will and fulfilling the requirements of the law. God is a judge over Israel also (forgiving but also avenging). Vs. 9 ends like vs. 5 with extolling and worshipping God.

SOME FURTHER POINTS ABOUT THE CHARACTER OF GOD

God is a ruler over all peoples – vs.2 (Isaiah 40-55 also expresses this view, written during the Babylonian exile, 587-539 BC) – but is also "our" God (vs. 5,8,9). God is both universal a sovereign and a personal God. Moreover, the special attribute of God as king is "Holiness." Under holiness are attributes that are a measure for any king: justice, righteousness, fairness, impartiality, generosity, "Steadfast Love."

THE CONTEXT OF PSALM 99

The location of this psalm in the Psalter is important. God's kingship is emphasized particularly in Psalms 93, 95-99 with 100 being the conclusion (versus a human king). These psalms are part of Book IV (90-106). Book III ends with psalm 89, which is a lament over the fall of the Davidic King. Psalm 90 is the only Psalm attributed to Moses (who lived before the time of Kings, but represents an alternative leader), and there are 7 additional references to Moses in Book IV. What does this imply?

It implies that: 1) only God is worthy of complete trust as king, and 2) there was a time when Israel had no king but God, and now that the psalmist is in exile is also such a time. Maybe this is a good thing. God is king over the whole world, not just Israel, and this means something now that the psalmist is no longer in Zion and the temple is no more.

DOES THE METAPHOR OF "KING" COMMUNICATE TODAY?

Many today have no experience of kingly rule, but even if they did, monarchy may seem an inherently oppressive concept in that people have no democratic choice about it and the power of a monarch seems fearful. Moreover, the belief in God as ruler of the world seems naïve at best when we consider all the troubles in our world and the tragedies of life. God seems far from "in control."

But perhaps there are other ways we may find the concept of God as "king" meaningful.

- 1) God's kingship is set over against all human kingships, as both a judgment against them as well as an ultimate freedom from them. Human kings may control many aspects of their subjects lives, but a person's spirit or soul can belong to God, and therefore, a person may find the courage to resist or maintain their personal integrity and dignity even if they lose so much else under the reign of a king abusing their power. God is the kind of king who gives up power in order to allow people the freedom to choose relationship with God. God is also just, compassionate, forgiving, and a protector of the weak and vulnerable with no personal need to accumulate wealth or take advantage of others to consolidate divine power.
- 2) God's kingship also includes images of warrior and judge. If final justice and judgment is with God, can this allow us the freedom to let go our grievances and hunger for some measure of retaliation, trusting that everyone is accountable to God in the end?
- 3) God's kingship also implies there is a kingdom. Jesus uses the image of a kingdom to talk about God's rule. He describes how by becoming his followers, we become citizens of the kingdom of God. If God rules, we live by God's will, even if we also live in a world that contradicts God's will. God's kingdom is forever whereas the kingdoms of this world are for now. This can give us courage, confidence and purpose to live our lives here as a foretaste of life in heaven and in a renewed world where God alone will rule, and rule in every person's heart. Such confidence in God's ultimate rule gives us peace.

For next week: read Psalms 120-134 with Psalm 121 the particular focus. These are all called "psalms of ascent."