

THE ALMIGHTY KING (PALM SUNDAY)

Psalms 47, 93 & 99

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“No one is ever really at ease in facing what we call ‘life’ and ‘death’ without a religious faith. The trouble with many people today is that they have not found a God big enough for modern needs.”¹ So wrote J. B. Phillips over forty years ago in his book *Your God Is Too Small*. According to Phillips, too many of us are crippled by a limited idea of God. Some of the stereotypes of God that he finds inadequate are the “Resident Policeman” or the “Heavenly Bosom” or the “Pale Galilean.”

For some folks, their conscience is almost all that they know about God. This still, small voice that makes them feel guilty and unhappy before, during, or after wrongdoing, is God speaking to them. This is God seen as a “Resident Policeman”—the cop within us that, to some extent, controls our conduct. It is unlikely that we will ever be moved to worship, love, and serve a nagging and somewhat irritating inner voice.²

The “Heavenly Bosom” conception of God is a form of escapism: when life gets too tough, there are those who withdraw from the world, telling themselves, “This world is not my home.” Yes, God is a refuge in times of trouble, but rather than fleeing from life, God is to be our strength in facing life.³ We must not become so heavenly minded that we are no earthly good.

The “Pale Galilean” is the God who always frowns and never smiles. If they were completely honest, many people would have to admit that God is to them an almost entirely negative force in their lives. Unless they have their God’s permission, they can do nothing. Their lives are cramped and narrow and joyless, because their god is the same. Such grim and gloomy folks actually feel it is wrong to be themselves, wrong to be free, wrong to enjoy beauty, wrong to grow and develop.⁴

¹J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (Macmillan, 1961), 7.

²Ibid., 15-18.

³Ibid., 33-37.

⁴Ibid., 50-53.

These are just three of the stereotypes of God that J. B. Phillips considers in his book before he goes on to suggest ways in which we can find the real God for ourselves. He writes: “If it is true that there is Someone in charge of the whole mystery of life and death, we can hardly expect to escape a sense of futility and frustration until we begin to see what He is like and what His purposes are.”⁵

You and I live in what is called a “postmodern” world, and the dominant characteristic of such a world is pluralism.⁶ A pluralistic-postmodern person—How’s that for a tongue twister?—a pluralistic-postmodern person is someone who rejects the possibility of universal and objective truth. He or she does not believe in the existence of one absolute truth that applies to all people at all times. In this climate, tolerance is the top cultural value. Those of different faiths are to tolerate one another and respect each other’s differences. Even more, those of different faiths are to affirm the truth of one another’s beliefs. According to one source, America may be “the most religiously diverse country in the world.”⁷

My point is this: we live in a climate and culture that affirms many Gods. But the Gods of pluralism are too small, for the individual is the ultimate standard of judgment. No God can be the one God for all people; but any God can be the only God for you. For a postmodernist, everyone is right unless they think they are.

I belong to a community of believers who are rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, a tradition that proclaims there is one, and only one, sovereign God. Furthermore, as a Christian, I believe that this sovereign God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ is the one, and only one, way to a relationship with the sovereign God of the universe. As a church, the essence of our faith—as I have expressed it—is the biggest obstacle the postmodernist must overcome if they are to become a part of our community. I will come back to this point; but now, I want us to consider three Psalms that unambiguously and unequivocally declare that the Lord God of Israel is the King of the universe.

⁵Ibid., 9.

⁶See Chris Altmann, *Preaching to Pluralists: How to Proclaim Christ in a Postmodern Age* (Chalice, 2004).

⁷“Divining the God Factor,” *U.S. News Online* (October 23, 2000).

First, we listen to the words of Psalm 47:

Clap your hands, all you nations;
shout to God with cries of joy.

For the LORD Most High is awesome,
the great King over all the earth.
He subdued nations under us,
peoples under our feet.
He chose our inheritance for us,
the pride of Jacob, whom he loved.

God has ascended amid shouts of joy,
the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets.
Sing praises to God, sing praises;
sing praises to our King, sing praises.
For God is the King of all the earth;
sing to him a psalm of praise.

God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.
The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted (TNIV).

It was an ongoing temptation for the people of Israel, and it has been an ongoing temptation for the church, to make our God too small. Evidence of this may be seen in the Christian practice of speaking about Jesus as a “personal savior”—language that seems to mean that we own God rather than that God owns us. To worship the God of Abraham and the God revealed in Jesus Christ is to worship a universal sovereign, and it means claiming every other person in the world as a sister or a brother.

According to Psalm 47, the Lord God has made a place for His people among the nations so that the nations may be included among His people. The people of God are not those who possess a specific ethnic or national identity, but are those who recognize that “God is the King of all the earth.”

We come, now, to Psalm 93:

The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty;
the LORD is robed in majesty and armed with strength;
indeed, the world is established, firm and secure.
Your throne was established long ago;
you are from all eternity.

The seas have lifted up, LORD,
the seas have lifted up their voice;
the seas have lifted up their pounding waves.

Mightier than the thunder of the great waters,
mightier than the breakers of the sea—
the LORD on high is mighty.

Your statutes, LORD, stand firm;
holiness adorns your house
for endless days (TNIV).

The reign of God is always proclaimed amid circumstances that seem to deny it. In the midst of the monstrous evil that exists in the world, worship gives us the opportunity to boldly and enthusiastically affirm that God alone rules the world and that God's purposes can be trusted. In worship, we proclaim "the Lord reigns" and we pledge to submit our lives to Him who is the ruler of heaven and earth.

But there is something more we need to see in this psalm. In our view of the world, there is no direct connection between creation and society. What we call natural laws and moral laws seem to us to be very different things. But in the view of Psalm 93, the commandments that order human life are the decrees of the sovereign creator of the universe. The ordering of the world and the ordering of society are expressions of one and the same rule of God. Just as God's natural laws make possible the continuity and stability of creation, so God's moral laws make possible the continuity and stability of society.

Finally, we look at Psalm 99:

The LORD reigns,
let the nations tremble;
he sits enthroned between the cherubim,
let the earth shake.
Great is the LORD in Zion;
he is exalted over all the nations.
Let them praise your great and awesome name—
he is holy.

The King is mighty, he loves justice—
you have established equity;
in Jacob you have done
what is just and right.
Exalt the LORD our God
and worship at his footstool;
he is holy.

Moses and Aaron were among his priests,
Samuel was among those who called on his name;
they called on the LORD
and he answered them.
He spoke to them from the pillar of cloud;
they kept his statutes and the decrees he gave them.

LORD our God,
you answered them;
you were to Israel a forgiving God,
though you punished their misdeeds.
Exalt the LORD our God
and worship at his holy mountain,
for the LORD our God is holy (TNIV).

This psalm is a hymn praising the Lord as King. “Enthroned between the cherubim” refers to God’s presence in the Temple, where the Ark of the Covenant serves as His throne.⁸ Three times the Lord God is said to be “holy.” In its three parts, Psalm 99 defines and describes the basic meaning of “holy”: the Lord God is holy in sovereign majesty, He is holy in justice, and He is holy in dealing with sin. And in each of the three parts of this psalm, there is a call to worship. To worship is to enter the throne room of the King of the universe. Once we have seen the Holy King, we will never see life and the world the same way again.

Worship, as depicted in the Psalms, stands in direct opposition to our culture of postmodernism. In a culture of pluralism that accepts many gods, and in a culture of relativity that affirms many truths, the Psalms call us to worship the Lord God who is the sovereign King over all the earth and who is holy. One Holy King who is the author of both natural law and moral law.

Is this message too exclusive for our postmodern world? Yes and no. Yes the Judeo-Christian tradition claims that there is only one God and that Jesus Christ is the only way to a relationship with this God. But that is only one side of the coin. The other side is No—the Judeo-Christian tradition unambiguously and unequivocally affirms that this one God is inclusive; that is, all peoples—regardless of race, ethnic background, social status, economic standing, gender, sexual orientation, or religious preference—all peoples are invited to worship and serve this one God. The final verses of Psalm 47 declare:

⁸See 1 Sam 4:4. Verse 5—the “footstool” is the Ark (see 1 Chron 28:2).

God reigns over the nations;
God is seated on his holy throne.
The nobles of the nations assemble
as the people of the God of Abraham,
for the kings of the earth belong to God;
he is greatly exalted (TNIV).

The people of God are not those who possess a specific racial, ethnic, social, or national identity; but are those who recognize that “God is the King of all the earth.”

Today is “Palm Sunday.” It is the start of what is called “Holy Week”⁹ and it commemorates the entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem. It is also called “Passion Sunday” since it is the beginning of the last week of events leading to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Palm Sunday is an event at which two conflicting emotions collide.

First, we celebrate the joy that was expressed when King Jesus entered the royal city of Jerusalem. The Gospel of Mark records the event as follows:

. . . When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

“Hosanna!”

“Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!”

“Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!”

“Hosanna in the highest heaven!”

Jesus entered Jerusalem and went into the temple courts. . . .

(Mark 11:7-11a, TNIV).

Joy—that is one of the emotions we feel on Palm Sunday.

But there is another emotion, an emotion that tempers our joy. We have a feeling of foreboding, a sense that something bad is going to happen. Palm Sunday is the jubilant beginning of a week that ends in pain and death. The king is crucified. However, Palm Sunday finds its fitting conclusion on Easter Sunday! On Palm Sunday, Jesus is proclaimed King by the people. On Easter Sunday, Jesus is proclaimed King by the power of the resurrection.

When I think back to the days when I was a youngster, I remember times when, in

⁹“Great Week” as called by Greek Orthodox.

¹⁰Actually, we can only trace to the fourth century A.D. the church tradition that all these things (triumphal entry; cleansing of the Temple; Olivet discourse; anointing at Bethany; Last Supper; betrayal, trial, and crucifixion) transpired during what came to be called the Passion Week.

playing with others, a dispute arose over who was in charge—over who would make the rules. If I attempted to take charge, and I confess it was something I often did, invariably someone would say, “Who died and made you king?” I don’t recall saying this very much, but I did hear it a lot; after all, I was the one trying to be king.

“Who died and made you king?” Interesting question. The facts are someone has died and I am not king. Jesus Christ died. He died for me and He died for you. He died for everyone. One savior—that’s exclusive—for all people—that’s inclusive. Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, died for every single human being that has ever lived and that will ever live. One died for all. And He was raised from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the throne of God. The risen Jesus Christ is King!

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