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The Awesome God

Psalm 97

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When Cynci and I were first married, we had a ministry assignment for a summer in Virginia Beach, Virginia. This is a place that we had never been to before. We packed up and loaded and headed from Nebraska and went all the way out to Virginia. When we arrived we found out we would be spending the summer in this sort of a beach shack. It basically had one room, and then there was a little bathroom and this small, dirty place that looked like it might fall over at any point in time. This was our newlywed paradise!

I think it was the first night we were there (maybe it was one of the first few nights), we had gone to sleep and in the middle of the night a storm began to roll in off the Atlantic Ocean. The wind began to blow strongly and the rain started to come down hard. But the thing I'll never forget was the lightning: it just was flashing like crazy. And then a bolt of lightning must have struck within 20 yards of where we were, because you could see the flash and ... boom! The entire place in which we were sleeping was shaking.

It was at that point in time that my wonderful new bride tapped me and said, "Honey, I'm scared." Of course, being the strong, supportive man that I am, I immediately said... "I'm scared too!" And then she tells me I rolled over and went to sleep, leaving her lying there all night. (I still had quite a bit to learn about the supportive husband thing!)

You know, it's amazing how we can be going on in life and everything can just be fine and wonderful, but in a *moment* we can encounter something truly powerful, and everything changes. In a moment we find out just how fearful and small we really are. And often that is in times of natural tragedy or things of great power in nature, like hurricanes or earthquakes or tornadoes or floods. Encounters with overwhelming power! These things leave us frightened. They leave us shaken to encounter power as great as that.

But you know, the strange thing is that the Bible says the reality of such great power ought to actually be a reason for us to rejoice. Would you turn with me to Psalm 97. We need to understand the context of Psalm 97. This psalm fits within a group of psalms—Psalm 93 to 100—that all speak of the kingly rule of God. They all talk of God's reign over the earth. Psalm 97 also fits into the immediate context of Psalm 96 and Psalm 98. All of these proclaim the coming of a universal King. But while Psalm 96 and Psalm 98 both speak of the thrill of that, Psalm 97 reminds us of another sobering aspect of His reign.

Psalm 97, verse 1:

The LORD reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the many islands be glad. (*NASB)

Now before we keep going, first it's foundationally important for us to understand that when the psalm speaks of God's reign here, it's referring to His sovereignty—*His absolute rule and authority over all*. That is so important to understand, because without sovereignty God would not be God. You see, actually sovereignty involves several of the attributes of God. In order to be sovereign—in order to have control and rule over all—God must be omniscient (He must be all-knowing). In order to be sovereign, God must be omnipotent (He must be all-powerful). And in order to be sovereign, God must also be absolutely free, incapable of being hindered by any unavoidable circumstances.

So sovereignty is, as theologian Arthur Pink has stated, "the foundation of Christian theology...the center of gravity in the system of Christian truth, the sun around which all of the lesser orbs are

grouped.” We need to realize that is what we’re talking about throughout this psalm when the psalmist says “the LORD reigns.”

The LORD reigns; let the earth rejoice; let the many islands be glad. Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Fire goes before Him, and burns up His adversaries round about. His lightnings lit up the world; the earth saw and trembled. The mountains melted like wax at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth. The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory. (vs. 1-6)

In Psalm 97 we get a picture of the frighteningly awesome power of the Lord Most High. And you know, the reality is it’s a picture of some of the facets of God that many people would simply just rather forget. I mean, we love to think of a God of love. We long to hear of His mercy, His kindness, His favor and His goodness toward us. But many of us don’t even like to think about a God of wrath. Yet we need to understand that Scripture clearly shows that throughout the Bible, when people came into an encounter with the living God, they were frightened by God.

One writer reminds us, “A manifestation of the true God is awe-inspiring to the point of bone-shattering fear and trembling on the part of the worshiper.” When God appeared at Sinai, all the people trembled. Even Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.” Isaiah cried, “Woe is me, I am ruined.” Ezekiel fell face down. Daniel turned pale. Habakkuk wrote, “I heard and my heart pounded. My lips quivered at the sound. Decay crept into my bones and my legs trembled.” And the author of Hebrews said, “Our God is a consuming fire.”

This means that we must never take God lightly, as if He were nothing more than some great heavenly buddy or pal. In fact, the common lightness of many in approaching God is not a sign of their close acquaintance with Him, as they probably suppose, but of the fact that they hardly know God at all. Those who know God approach Him joyfully but reverently, with the greatest respect and awe.

Two psalms before this one we read, “Come, let us *bow down* in worship; let us *kneel* before the LORD our Maker.” So we recognize the awesome nature of our God. But here in Psalm 97 we’re told that not only should we reflect on these aspects of God’s character but we should actually *rejoice* in them.

Look again at verse 1: “The LORD reigns; let the earth *rejoice*; let the many islands be *glad*.” So how do verse 1 and verses 2-5 possibly fit together? Well, actually, quite nicely. In fact, I would argue that we ought to rejoice in God not *in spite of* the terrible awesomeness of His omnipotent and holy power, but rather I would contend that we should rejoice in God precisely *because* of these things. Why?

Let’s think together a little bit about the ramifications of God’s true nature. Verse 2: “Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne.” Verse 6: “The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory.” One of the foundational aspects of the nature of God is the reality of His righteousness. God is *absolutely* righteous. He *always* does what is right. He is perfect in holiness, in purity and in truth. The foundation of His leadership of all that exists is righteousness. But the reality is, we live in a world that is in bondage to decay. Sin has touched and tainted *everything* around us. And often we are so surrounded by sin, we are so immersed in a world that is tainted by sin, that we become inoculated to its truly evil essence. Often we become casually indifferent to the sin in our world, even to the sin in our lives.

But friends, it is important for us to remember and to realize that God is *never* indifferent toward sin. It's only when we see Him in all of His righteousness, as He really is, that we then begin to grasp just how *ugly* sin is.

Isaiah 6 is a perfect illustration; I alluded to it before. In that passage, through a vision, the prophet Isaiah enters into the very presence of God. We're told he saw the Lord sitting high and exalted on His throne, and He's being attended to and He's being worshiped by seraphs. The place literally *trembled* at God's voice. And Isaiah immediately responds, "Woe is me! I am ruined because I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. And my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!"

You see, it is when we see God as He really is—in all of His righteousness—that we begin to understand the reality of the sin in our world...and also in our own lives. And it's only then that we truly begin to grow in love and worship of our Savior for His redeeming grace.

Some time ago I was in a ministry meeting where we were working through and dealing with the horrible and hurtful consequences of another person's sin. And we were so clearly seeing that the wages of sin really is death: just a wake of destruction. But at the same time, I was trying to remind us that we *all* sin and fall short of the glory of God. While I was saying that, someone else interrupted me to point out the fact that I hadn't done what this person had done, and so it was different. And the reality is, I hadn't done that or anything like that, so I didn't say anything more.

But you know, as I have reflected on that over the years, I've realized that by my silence I allowed a lie to stand. And the lie is that I have somehow done something to deserve *less* than God's judgment—that because I have not done this or I have not done that, then I am somehow less deserving of God's wrath. The truth is, when I see God in all of His holiness and in all of His righteousness, and when I compare my life and my heart and my mind to His, not to other people in this world but to Him, then I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that there is really only *one* thing I deserve: hell, an eternity separated from the love of God as a consequence for my unrighteous life.

As I continue to grow and mature in my relationship with Christ, I struggle a lot less today with why it is that God judges people. Instead, I marvel a lot more at the wonder of His *not* judging me. It's when we understand God's awesome righteousness that we truly begin to rejoice in His mercy, in His love, and what He has done for us in Christ. "The LORD reigns; let the earth rejoice."

There's another reason to rejoice in the sovereign rule of God. Look again at verses 2-3: "Clouds and thick darkness surround Him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of His throne. Fire goes before Him, and burns up His adversaries round about." Not only do we rejoice in His righteousness and in His mercy in spite of our unrighteousness, but we also rejoice in the very fact of His justice. Now, sometimes that's hard for us to grasp. We read words like verse 3 and we just don't like them. But the reality is, we *do* rejoice in justice.

You see, one of the great lies the adversary has successfully propagated in the earth today is that we (I mean "we" as people in general) are basically by nature good: maybe some have had a bad upbringing or they're less fortunate or they're emotionally or psychologically disturbed and so they do horrible things, but *most* of us are in general good people. That lie has been so ingrained in our world's view that the reality of evil is unimaginable to some. That's part of why the events of 9/11 were so shocking, so disturbing to so many. Few in our world thought that there were people who could be so clearly, so blatantly, and just plainly *evil*. But that is the reality of a fallen world.

And when we see that reality, something deep in our hearts cries out for justice. We want *someone* to set things straight. We long for the coming of a king who will do what is right and who will make everything right. And that's a picture of the sovereign rule of God, just as verses 2-3 say. Justice is also foundational to His rule. And again, when clearly understood together, God's justice and God's mercy are *both* reasons to rejoice. We do *not* want a world without justice, but we *do* long for mercy when we recognize that we too are deserving of God's just judgment because of our sin.

Still another reason to rejoice is seen here in the first section. Look at verses 4-5: "His lightnings lit up the world; the earth saw and trembled. The mountains melted like wax at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth." In verses 4-5 we get a clear picture of God's *awesome* power. He reigns in power—so much so that in comparison to His capacity, the mountains may as well be made of wax. And when we think of such ideas or such images often our response is a response of *fear*.

But is that how we *should* respond to the awesome power of God? Well, I'd say yes...and no. I'd say no because, for the believer who rightly understands the perfectly fitted, balanced nature of God's attributes, we recognize that although God has power beyond limits, that power will *not* be used for our demise. You see, we who have received His forgiveness by personally trusting in Jesus Christ, understand that His wrath was poured out on the cross and it was *satisfied* by Jesus' *full* payment for *all* of our unrighteousness. And Romans 5 tells us that having been justified by faith, we have peace with God. Colossians 1 and Ephesians 2 remind us of the change that Christ has brought about for us—taking us from darkness and a state of being enemies of God, to being His dearly loved children. John reminds us of how great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God; and that is what we are. Romans 8 proclaims: "If God is for us, who can be against us?" We do not fear God in wrath if we are in Christ. He adopted us as His own children and He is our *loving* heavenly Father, not our frightful enemy.

But I do say yes, we should fear God, in terms of holding Him in holy awe. We should stand amazed at His power. Like all who have come before Him in Scripture, we should acknowledge the truly awesome nature of the Lord Most High and we should revere and respect Him with a rightful sense of fear and awe. But again, this picture of God's power is painted here in Psalm 97 in the context of verse 1. It's painted in the context of an admonition to rejoice. Why is that? Why does the psalmist say rejoice in these things? I think it's because our God, our Father, our Defender, our Shield, our Deliverer, our Advocate, our Shepherd, our Lord is *not* powerless to act on our behalf.

In fact, it is just the opposite. Our Lord has limitless power to act. Some would avoid thought on the frighteningly powerful nature of God. But in so doing they would miss the confidence that comes from understanding there is *nothing* that can keep our great God from accomplishing His good will, from bringing about the deliverance that He has ordained for us. And in order for God to be truly good, God *must* be absolutely powerful. Otherwise, all of His great promises and all of our deep hopes are just empty wishes.

You know, one of the things that amazes me about being a father is how my kids look to me and trust in me. My youngest is now four years old, but he's still at that age where if we're going somewhere or we're doing something and a circumstance comes up that causes him a little bit of fear—if something looks just a little bit uncertain and makes him unsettled—his response is automatic. No matter where we are, he just quickly reaches up and grabs my hand. And along we go. He toddles away with a smile on his face and trust in his heart.

Even though he doesn't consciously think about it, I believe there are two reasons that my four-year-old reaches up and grabs my hand when he encounters frightening trials and circumstances. I believe

he reaches up for me, first of all, because he believes that I'm good. Now I'm certainly far from perfect as a dad, but he knows in his little heart I'm his daddy. I'm *for* him. I *love* him! My desire is not his harm; my desire is his *good*. I'd give my life to care for and protect him. He's my son! I believe he reaches up and puts his hand in mine because he believes I'm good.

I believe he reaches up and takes my hand for a second reason. He doesn't consciously think of it, but unconsciously I believe he reaches up and takes my hand because he believes I have the *power* to do good. He's little; I'm big. He reaches up because he believes by taking *my* hand he'll be safe and secure. He believes I have the ability to protect him, to watch over him. He believes that even in the storm, being close to Dad is a safe place (something my wife was hoping for in Virginia Beach and quickly found out that wasn't really the reality!) But my son still believes those things.

It's a picture of what we ought to do in our relationship with God—recognizing *both* His goodness and His power. We rejoice in the sovereign rule of God because He rules with righteousness; He judges with justice; He reigns with power.

He also reveals Himself in glory. Verse 6: “The heavens declare His righteousness, and all the peoples have seen His glory.” God gives general revelation of His presence as He manifests His power in all the earth. In the wondrous beauty of His creation—and even in the times of horrible overwhelming tragedy—the power and the reality of an unseen God is made known. And His glory is like no other.

Psalm 97 turns on verse 7 when we recognize just how pathetic is our propensity to worship lesser things. Verse 7:

Let all those be *ashamed* who serve graven images, who boast themselves of idols; worship Him all you gods.

On Wednesday night I returned again from India. On this trip we also en route traveled through Thailand, which is a Buddhist country, and in both places I was again heartbroken by the pathetic sadness of people worshipping worthless statues. Several times we entered into temples only to find people bowing down to a carving of stone, praying that this *rock* might somehow move on their behalf. But their gods do not hear; they do not speak; they are powerless to act. And their gods are their shame. India is such an illustration of what the psalmist is speaking of in verse 7 as the people struggle in misery, clinging to gods that bring no relief and don't even bring any hope.

I think we all want a big God. I think we want a powerful God, a sovereign God, a righteous God, a just God—a God who is able to work in our world and on our behalf. I think even in India they want that. But what's their answer? Build a bigger god. Just outside the city of Delhi there is a statue of the god Shiva that is over 65 feet tall. We saw devotees coming 250 kilometers, walking by foot, with water from the Himalayas to bring as an expression of worship to this worthless piece of stone. They boasted to us how it took over three and a half years to build this 65-foot god—this monstrosity that could do absolutely *nothing* for the people! And it breaks the heart of the Father.

By the way, on the exciting side, I do just have to share with you an encouraging brief report. In the last two weeks we saw 90 men go in to train and to become new Berean church-planting pastors in six places all across India. It is so exciting as God starts to take our church-planting partnership and cause it to really take off. In one state in northern India that we have targeted, there are 23 million people, and there are almost as many believers here at Lincoln Berean as there are in all of that state. In one part of that state there are four districts (something like counties) that we've targeted for the next year. In those four districts, there are 3.9 million people—more than twice the population of the

state of Nebraska—and there are *no* viable active churches. Think of that! Twice the population of our entire state...no churches. But today 20 men are in training to be Berean pastors, who in this coming year will go out into that place and start new church-planting movements and ministries. It is awesome what God is doing—what He has given us the privilege to be a part of!

You know, the writers of the Old Testament, they lived in a time of great idolatry. And I think being in a place like India really helps with the understanding of the sentiment of this last part of verse 7. You stand there and you watch people bow down before this worthless stone, you watch people give their hearts and their hopes and their lives to a lie of the evil one, and you just want to take out a sledgehammer and show how powerless that god really is. In your heart and in your spirit you cry out with the sentiment of verse 7, “Worship Him [*worship Him!*], all you gods.” There’s only one God! He is a great God and He is worthy of our worship. Only He is worthy.

That cry doesn’t just apply in India; it’s for us right here as well. Because here in America we may not bow down before statues, but we sure do give our adoration and our devotion and even our lives to things like money, position, comfort, popularity, pleasure, prestige. We have our own panoply of idols that we bow down to—little gods that we trust in to make our lives full and meaningful. And friends, when we do, *that is our* shame. And the call of the psalmist in Psalm 97 is just as much for us as it is for the people in India. Worship Him—Him alone. Give your adoration, your devotion, your hope, your very life *only* to Him, not the lesser things of this world—only to the one true and living God who is the Sovereign over all.

Again, the psalm reminds us that the people of God *rejoice* in the rule of God. Verse 8:

Zion heard this and was glad, and the daughters of Judah have rejoiced because of Your judgments, O LORD. For You are the LORD Most High over all the earth; You are exalted far above all gods. (vs. 8-9)

God rules with righteousness; He judges with justice; He reigns with power; He reveals Himself in glory and He dwells in majesty. He is the Lord Most High. He is exalted far above all gods. He alone is God. He is the awesome God! And what should our response be? We ought to rejoice in His sovereign rule. We ought to trust Him in ways we never have. We ought to give our hearts and our lives *fully* to Him. And we ought to reject the lure of sin.

Verse 10: “Hate evil, you who love the LORD.” In Proverbs 3:7 we are told, “Fear the LORD and shun evil.” Here in Psalm 97, verses 1-6 illustrate the reality of a healthy fear of God. Verse 10 reminds us to love Him and to hate what He hates. And friends, God hates sin. God despises evil. God is good, and evil is contrary to all that He is.

We as His people are to be growing to be more like Him, and we want to love Him. We want to love Him because He first loved us, and He is so *good* to us. The psalm reminds us of that as it comes to an end. As we shun evil, as we draw near to Him, He provides us with four things.

Verse 10 again:

Hate evil, you who love the LORD, who preserves the souls of His godly ones [*He provides us with protection*], **He delivers them from the hand of the wicked** [*He provides us with deliverance*].

Verse 11:

Light is sown like seed for the righteous [*He provides us with light for our path*], **and gladness for the upright in heart** [*He provides us with joy for our journey*].

And verse 12 brings it all back around and sums it up:

Be glad in the LORD, you righteous ones; and give thanks to His holy name.

Earlier this summer we were all sobered and reminded again of just what power exists out there when that F4 tornado came through Hallam, touched down again at Norris, and went through southern Lancaster County. We shook at the thought of such an overwhelming force. But I want to ask you: Which is the greater power—the power of a storm to destroy...or the power of our God to protect? When you think about the power of a storm to literally take a house and throw it from its foundation—the power of a storm to take bricks and to take wood and heavy objects and just throw them all over—that is such great power. But which is greater, the power of that storm...or the power of a God who could have a small family right in the middle of that stuff—with the debris and things flying everywhere—and the power of a sovereign God to protect that family to such a degree that they get up and they walk out?

Our God is a powerful God, and His amazingly frightful power is cause for us to rejoice. It has been said that we spend most of our lives trying to order our world in such a way as to ensure we are in control. Psalm 97 reminds us it is such a good thing that we are not.

Father, we thank You that You're the one who is sovereign. We thank You that You are the Lord Most High. We thank You that You reign. We thank You that You rule. We thank You that You are righteous. We thank You that You are just. We thank You that You are exalted. We thank You that You are holy. God, I pray that we would see You as You really are and that our lives would be changed.

Lord, if there are any who have not trusted Christ as Savior, I pray, Lord, that in the silence of their heart they would just say, "Yes, Lord, I receive Your mercy, Your forgiveness. I don't want Your wrath. I want to know that I'm Your child, that all of this awesome power might be for my good and not my destruction."

Lord, we thank You that You have redeemed us, that You love us. Lord, we thank You that because of Your power and Your wonder, You are able to accomplish that which You have planned for our lives. Help us to give ourselves fully to You, to trust in You and You alone. In Your name we pray, Amen.

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.