

# A Holy Kingdom

*Psalm 99*

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<sup>1</sup> The LORD is king; let the peoples tremble! He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake! <sup>2</sup> The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples. <sup>3</sup> Let them praise your great and awesome name. Holy is he! <sup>4</sup> Mighty King,\* lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob. <sup>5</sup> Extol the LORD our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!

<sup>6</sup> Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the LORD, and he answered them. <sup>7</sup> He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his decrees, and the statutes that he gave them.

<sup>8</sup> O LORD our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings. <sup>9</sup> Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy.

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It was a dark day in American History. On April 15, 1865, Abraham Lincoln, the 16<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, was pronounced dead, the result of a gunshot wound sustained the evening before at the Ford Theater in Washington D.C. As the word of his death rippled out, the mood around the country alternated between outrage and mourning.

In New York City, anger was the dominant mindset. Historian Allan Peskin wrote that, “The city seethed with rumors and frightened crowds gathered in the streets for news and reassurance. They were in an ugly mood.” A mob, estimated to be 50,000 strong crammed into the Wall Street area. And just about the time the crowd was ready to lash out, to “wreak their vengeance” against an anti-war newspaper and its staff, Ohio Congressman James Garfield suddenly appeared on a balcony above them holding a small American flag in his hand.

Garfield began to address the crowd:

*Fellow citizens, clouds and darkness are around Him! His pavilion is dark waters and thick clouds of the skies! Justice and judgment are the establishment of His throne! Mercy and truth shall go before His face! Fellow citizens, God reigns, and the government at Washington still lives!*

Peskin wrote that according to eyewitnesses, the effect was tremendous. The crowd was miraculously hushed, turning its thoughts at once from violence to a contemplation of God's eternal yet inscrutable will.<sup>i</sup> Garfield, a Disciples of Christ preacher-turned-Congressman, had just delivered, perhaps, his greatest sermon. And his eventual rise to the Presidency sixteen years later may have been fueled by the notoriety gained by his sermon that day.

The words that Garfield used to calm the crowd that day were not his words, but the sentiments of a royal psalm. These psalms begin with an enthronement cry: "The Lord is King!" Scholars suggest that Psalms 93, 97, and 99, which all begin this way, are the theological heart of the Psalter.<sup>ii</sup> But more than that, they are the central affirmation of the whole Bible – the Lord reigns!

This is the third week of our *Summer in the Psalms* Series. Last week during Children's Moment, Claire taught the kids the trick to finding the book of Psalms in the Bible – to open your Bible halfway. This week, let me also share with you another "Sunday School trick" about the psalms. If you look at the beginning and end of a psalm, in most cases, these sentences will tell you what the psalm is all about. If you remember, two weeks ago when we looked at Psalm 147, it began and ended with the word, "hallelujah." This call to praise the Lord indicated that this was a praise psalm. The same trick works for our psalm this morning – Psalm 99. It begins with the words, "The Lord is king" and ends with the phrase, "the Lord our God is holy." These two sentences alert us to the fact that this psalm belongs in the category of royal psalms – psalms that have to do with kingship.

Drilling down further, Psalm 99 is an example of a particular kind of royal psalms known as enthronement psalms. While most royal psalms have to do with Israel's human king, the subset known as enthronement psalms have to do with God as Israel's king. And the main point the psalmist wants to make this morning to Israel is that the Lord God, who is their king, is holy.

Holiness is a topic we think we know about, but maybe not as fully as we should. If you have ever played the game *Taboo*, you know the usual definition of holy. When playing *Taboo*, one person is given a holder full of cards. Then, he or she has to describe the word at the top of the card in such a way that the rest of his or her team can guess the word. However, the trick is that certain descriptive words are "taboo" – these words can't be used to describe the main word. For example, when describing the word *tightrope* one cannot use the words *circus*, *acrobat*, *balance*, *walk*, or *high wire*.

In the game of *Taboo*, the goal is for your team to correctly guess as many aptly described words as possible in 60 seconds. However, if you use one of the "Taboo" words, the other team gets to "buzz" you and they collect a point for your error.

We can all think of something that is taboo – something that is thought of as off limits or not to be spoken of. For example, at my house, it was taboo to talk about how old your mother is. It was taboo to talk about bodily functions at the dinner table. At age six, I learned the hard way that it was taboo to use the name of our Lord and Savior in disgust when the television was turned off for dinner. I can still taste the soap...

Something taboo can also be something prohibited by religious or social custom. It's taboo for our Jewish and Muslim friends to eat pork. And sometimes, it's taboo to do normal American things in foreign countries.

Earlier this month, during his official visit to the United Kingdom, President Trump did what was taboo. At the state banquet, The President put his hand on Queen Elizabeth's back – a breach of royal etiquette. But this wasn't the first instance of an American doing something taboo. Ten years ago, First Lady Michelle Obama also

created a stir when she broke from tradition, giving Queen Elizabeth a small hug. Similar to their reaction to President Trump’s recent gaffe, the British media had a “field day.” Some called it an extraordinary show of affection. Others called it a massive breach of protocol. When asked in an interview what the big deal was with touching the Queen, author Charles Mosley said:

*The big deal is that the queen is normally a sacred person. In monarchies, there’s a sacredness that surrounds the sovereign...<sup>iii</sup>*

Whether you are comfortable with using the term “sacred” to describe a human king or queen, the fact is, kings and queens are set apart. In one application of the word, they are holy – they are “other than.” So whether it is the King of Spain, the prom king, the Sacramento Kings, Stephen King, King Kong, or Burger King, the king is different...and should be treated that way. This means a certain distance, a certain behavior, and a certain formality should be maintained. Any breach in this protocol is considered taboo.

Interestingly, taboo is actually the Polynesian word for “holy.” When we talk about holiness, it’s this idea of avoiding something taboo that often comes to mind. In fact, in the Fijian language, the Bible is called *Ai Vola Tabu* (the “taboo” book). It’s too sacred to touch. Actually, most of our Bibles have a similar title: “Holy Bible.” But we don’t see anything wrong with touching them. Instead, we encourage people to touch them; to read them; to pour over and dig into them. We want people to know about the God who is described within. But, in doing so, we can’t forget that the God revealed to us on the pages of our Bibles is holy. And the hopeful promise of Psalm 99 is that God is holy but not just in the way we might think.

Psalm 99 opens with the enthronement cry, “The Lord is King.” Don’t gloss over the fact that the Lord is king implies something. God is mighty and is to be feared. Like every monarch, a certain distance must be maintained, a certain behavior must be kept,

and a certain formality is required because the Lord is King and we are not. The first three verses tell of God's might and call on all the nations to praise God not because of what he has done, but because of who he is.

But just as the first three verses tell of God's might, verses 4 and 5 tell of God's mercy. They indicate just how intimate God's involvement actually is. God is a lover of justice, a founder of equity, and a carrier of righteousness. Reflecting on Israel's history, the psalmist could see just how God revealed himself to his people and the nature of God's character. Over and over, this Almighty, Awesome God was not separate from human places and matters – God didn't keep his distance. God dwelt among the people of Israel in cloud and tabernacle. Time after time, God was intimately aware of their cries and needs.

This nearness of God is identified even more fully in the final section of Psalm 99. In verses 6-9, the psalmist describes how Moses, Aaron, and Samuel were all intermediaries; leaders in touch with God. They spoke to God on behalf of the people and God heard them. Not only was God close enough to hear, he forgave their actions, even as he judged their wrongs. God, the sovereign king, chose to work through human beings, establishing a relationship with them.

What holds the three sections of Psalm 99 together is holiness. Three times in nine verses, the psalmist declares God to be holy. The possibility of relationship with this great and awesome God is unthinkable, and yet it is possible...all because God is holy.

The great twentieth century theologian Karl Barth liked to speak of God as “wholly other.” That's because, to call God “holy” is to acknowledge that God is radically different from anything in the universe that exists or that we can imagine.<sup>iv</sup> The word “holy” calls attention to all that God is: a sovereign king to tremble before and to be feared; a listening and loving presence; a forgiver of shortcomings; and, an avenger of wrongs. It is impossible to define it adequately. Unfortunately, the most common mistake we make is to think of holiness primarily in terms of human righteousness. That

is, we think of it as moral perfection, purity, or right conduct (avoiding taboos)...At its root, “holy” is not an ethical concept at all. Rather it is the very nature of God that distinguishes him from all else.<sup>v</sup>

In the nine verses of Psalm 99, holiness is redefined as a compassionate and creative love.<sup>vi</sup> The wholly other God offered a pardon. The words of the great hymn, *Holy, Holy, Holy*, we are so used to singing are correct: God is merciful and mighty. Yet, what Psalm 99 tells us is that God is also approachable and justly. God doesn’t give us the “Heisman” – tucking the rest of the world in one arm and pushing us away with the other. Instead, God draws us close, hears our cries for help when we are hurting, and forgives us, even while holding us and the whole world accountable.

Nowhere is this kind of involvement and forgiving love more evident than in Jesus Christ. Like Psalm 147, the psalm of praise we looked at two weeks ago, Psalm 99 has an incarnational feel to it. Instead of Zion and tabernacle, Jesus Christ became the earthly locus of God’s presence and power.<sup>vii</sup> “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” (John 1:14) What we see in Jesus Christ is that God, the Holy One, became persistently present in the midst of humanity – just as Psalm 99 described. God didn’t become present just with a particular group of women and men 2,000 years ago, but is present with us today as well. We recognize the holy presence of Christ when we light the candles each week, remembering Christ’s promise that where two or three are gathered, he is in their midst (Matthew 18:20). We celebrate the presence of the Risen Christ when we gather at the Table to break bread and bless a cup. And we give thanks that the Spirit of Christ is present in the darkest moments of our lives – in emergency rooms, in hospice wings, in courtrooms, and in our deepest moments of depression and despair. The good news for you and me is that God’s holiness is not about God’s avoidance [of these things] – God distancing himself from these things - but God’s willingness to come alongside and bear the burden.<sup>viii</sup> The God who hears our cries offers forgiveness, and has set in

motion justice and righteousness through Jesus Christ. We see once again in Psalm 99 that the psalms tell the story that Jesus Christ came to complete.

The ideas of what is just and right took center stage earlier this week. On Wednesday night and Thursday night, twenty candidates took the stage in Miami for the first debates designed to help narrow the field of Democrats running for President...running for a position considered to be the most powerful person in the world. Both nights saw candidates address some of the hot topics of the day: immigration, health care, stewardship of the environment, financial controls, civil rights, gun rights, policing policies, and a host of other issues. Although good and faithful people disagree with other good and faithful people on how to best address these hot topics, these topics, and others like them, are important things to talk about. If we believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, then this shapes our human communities and the commitments we make in the world. As Christians, our task is to work on creating an alternative community in which Jesus Christ is truly sovereign. Sometimes, that may come through public policy. More often, it comes through changed hearts and changed minds of people like you and me.

So, what stands in the way of our realizing the possibilities held out by the royal psalms? The answers include fear, national pride, greed, a thirst for power, and ignorance. Today, in the midst of politics, immigration concerns, geopolitical conflicts, global financial struggles, and other issues; today, when African dictators, Afghan warlords, Latin American tyrants, Middle Eastern terrorists, and even term-limited presidents want to rule the world; today, when the crowds become mobs waiting to exact vengeance for perceived wrongs, the only assurance we have is that God reigns. That's the cry of Psalm 99. The Lord is King! Our God reigns.

On April 15, 1865, nothing in America gave any evidence that Garfield's assertion was true – that the Lord reigns. It was as much a prayer, a hope, a plea, as it was a declaration of fact. But just as soon as the words were spoken, their effect was felt. The chaos calmed, the confusion ceased, and a confidence was restored.<sup>ix</sup> And for people of faith,

that's the promise Psalm 99 holds for us. No matter what comes our way, as individuals or a nation, God is mightier still.

This Thursday, the Fourth of July, we will celebrate our nation's 243<sup>rd</sup> birthday. With parades and cookouts, concerts and fireworks, we will give thanks for the blessings of our nation and pray that God continues to shed God's grace upon this country. But as you and I do this, let's keep Sam in mind. Not Uncle Sam, but the Old Testament prophet Samuel. Some might say that his mention in Psalm 99 is a bit odd – sort of an afterthought. Moses and Aaron were priests...oh, and Samuel was there, too. But, I believe he is there for a reason. After all, when the Israelites clamored for a king – someone who could set everything right, who could restore their political fortunes, who could lead them into a greater future - it was Samuel who kept telling them they already had a king – the Lord God Almighty. And so do we.

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<sup>i</sup> Peskin, Allan. *Garfield*. Kent State University Press, 1978.

<sup>ii</sup> Mays, James L. "Psalms" in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994.

<sup>iii</sup> CNN.com. "Michelle Obama's Warm Touch with Queen Draws Gasps."

<http://www.cnn.com/2009/LIVING/04/02/michelle.obama.queen/>

<sup>iv</sup> Morris, Bobby. "Commentary on Psalm 99" in *Working Preacher*. February 10, 2013.

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1534](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1534)

<sup>v</sup> Boice, James Montgomery. *Psalms, Vol 2*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996

<sup>vi</sup> Knight, George A. F. *Psalms, Vol. 2*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983.

<sup>vii</sup> McCann, J. Clinton. "The Book of Psalms" in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol. IV*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Skinner, Douglas B. *Vertical Habits (7) – The Royal Psalms*. Sermon preached July 7, 2013.