

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Psalms</b>		Pastor/Teacher
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### THE MYSTERY OF THE GENTILES

**Introduction:** Psalm 47 is one of many Old Testament passages that looks back on God's past faithfulness to his covenant promises as the basis for hope in his future promise-keeping. In this case, the psalmist reminds us of the conquest of Canaan fulfilling God's promises to Abraham (verses 3-4) and then looks forward to a greater conquest wherein all the nations will be brought to worship the one true God of Israel (verses 7-9). But how would this come about? Especially considering the bitter history of many wars and violent oppression between Israel and the nations around her during and after the Babylonian Exile, how could these peoples ever know peace with one another? How could it ever be that all the nations of the world would join Israel in joyful worship of their God?

#### 1. Psalm 47:1-4: The Lord's Awesome Conquest

- a. Verses 1 and 2 begin the psalm by calling for worship of the Lord of Israel, which is what the psalms are all about, of course. There is a key difference here in the first couple of verses, however: most psalms focus on Israel and Judah as God's worshipers, while this psalm calls on *all nations everywhere* to bring him offerings of praise.
  - i. This builds very naturally on Psalm 46, which describes the Lord's final unmaking of the creation<sup>1</sup> and violently putting an end to all wars between the nations by breaking their weapons.<sup>2</sup>
  - ii. The way the psalmist tells the nations to worship, with clapping and loud songs of joy, tells us this worship is supposed to be eager and exuberant, not reluctant or begrudging. This already begins to raise the question from the introduction: What will make all these nations so glad to know and praise the God of Israel?
  - iii. When verse 2 says the Lord is to be feared, it means feared in the sense of awe, not necessarily terror. Enemies of God who hate him and refuse to repent and believe should be terrified, but all who appreciate God's sovereign majesty are overwhelmed with awe. Given this psalm's emphasis on *joyful* worship, it is especially clear in this context that the psalmist means awe rather than terror.

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<sup>1</sup> "Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling." - Psalm 46:2-3

<sup>2</sup> "He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. 'Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!'" - Psalm 46:9-10

- b. Verses 3 and 4 seem to be at odds with 1 and 2. Conquered peoples do not normally rejoice and clap their hands to celebrate their conquerors, or at least not sincerely.
  - i. There is debate over whether verse 3 should be translated in the present or the past tense. If it is in the past tense, then it refers to the Conquest of Canaan beginning under Joshua and completed under David. If it is in the present tense, then it refers more generally to the way God wins victories for his people in all times and places, and ultimately to his final victory over Satan and the fallen world at the end of history. According to this second view, which I prefer, the Conquest should likely come to mind first as we sing this psalm (especially in connection with verse 4), but then it would bring us to think of all the times God has brought and will bring the nations low for his glory. Egypt, being utterly humiliated and giving up riches to the Hebrews,<sup>3</sup> was certainly put under their feet in the Exodus. Belshazzar, and through him Babylon, was put as it were under Daniel's feet in Daniel 5. At the end of Esther, Persia was put under the feet of the Jews for two days, during which they destroyed all their enemies with the emperor's permission.<sup>4</sup>
  - ii. Verse 4 speaks of God choosing Israel's heritage, and naturally brings the promised land of Canaan to mind. This was the inheritance that God promised to Abraham for his descendants, even though it was owned by several different nations at the time.<sup>5</sup>
  - iii. Verse 4 also reminds us explicitly that God loves Jacob (remember that Jacob is another name for Israel) uniquely among the nations of the earth, reinforcing the mystery: how will all nations come to the Lord in worship if the Lord remains committed to this special relationship with Israel?

## 2. Psalm 47:5-9 The Lord's Victory Parade

- a. Verse 5, the midpoint of the psalm, turns from describing God's conquest to the celebration of his victory.
  - i. This victory parade is to be held in a very specific place: Jerusalem. When the psalmist says God "has gone up," he uses the word which so often refers to a journey to Jerusalem. Even if you are coming from the north, you never "go down" to Jerusalem. You can only "go up" to Jerusalem in Hebrew. This is why the psalms Jews would traditionally sing on the way to Jerusalem for major festivals are called the Psalms of Ascent (120-134). Even in Hebrew today, when the modern state of Israel counts the major waves of Jewish immigration in the 19th and 20th centuries, they call them the "aliyahs," this same Hebrew word for ascending. If you had grown up steeped in this tradition, you would immediately think the Lord has gone to Jerusalem in Psalm 47:5. This, of course, makes perfect

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<sup>3</sup> "The people of Israel had also done as Moses told them, for they had asked the Egyptians for silver and gold jewelry and for clothing. And the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. Thus they plundered the Egyptians." - Exodus 12:35-36

<sup>4</sup> "... when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them. The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples." - Esther 9:1-2

<sup>5</sup> "On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.'" - Genesis 15:18-21

sense with God having defended and sustained his city in the midst of the final battle in psalm 46.<sup>6</sup>

- b. Verses 6 and 7 reiterate the command to worship the Lord with singing, and emphasize again that the Lord rules over *all the earth*, not just Jerusalem or Israel. After verses 3 and 4 had appeared to narrow the focus of God's interest in this psalm to just Jacob, verses 6-9 return to the global scope of verses 1 and 2. These lines say to the Gentile nations, "Our Lord is *your king, too!* Even if you don't recognize him yet, you will one day!"
  - c. Verse 8 subtly reminds us of the difference between the Creator and his creatures. God rules *over*, i.e. from on high, and on a *holy* throne. The psalmist has been portraying God as similar to a great conqueror like Alexander the Great, but now reminds us that God is fundamentally different from every human ruler. If we translated verse 8 more woodenly, the last phrase would be, "on a throne of his holiness." In other words, his holiness is *his throne*.<sup>7</sup> His holiness gives him the right to rule as he does, and he governs all things according to his holiness.
  - d. Verse 9 closes with the most shocking statement of the whole psalm. The princes of the Gentiles will not be outsiders or second class citizens when they worship God. They will actually be a part of the people of the God of Abraham! They will be joined together in peace and shared love for the one true Creator of all, because God will have conquered all. He will display the shields of all his defeated foes, representing the entire earth, in the great victory parade which this psalm depicts.
3. But how could this ever be? What could God do to purify uncircumcised, unclean, pagan nations and bring them to joyfully worship him?
- a. This would seem particularly unlikely during and after the Babylonian Exile, when Gentile hostility toward the Jews seemed to grow ever greater as the centuries passed. With a few bright exceptions,<sup>8</sup> the history of Jewish-Gentile relations was fraught with violence, open warfare, cruelty, hatred, and oppression of all kinds. When Antiochus IV Epiphanes slaughtered a pig to Zeus on the altar of the Second Temple, Psalm 47 certainly would have looked very far from reaching its fulfillment. When the Roman general Pompey the Great barged into the Holy of Holies, he was sadly not struck with awe. He did not start singing psalms of praise. Instead, he declared the Jews to be atheists because they appeared to worship nothing at all (i.e., there was no visual depiction of the Lord).
    - i. Ironically, however, the Exile exposed the deeper problem that needed to be solved before the Gentiles could be brought to worship the Lord. After Israel failed to keep the Lord's covenant and lost their earthly inheritance, it became all the clearer

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<sup>6</sup> "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved;  
God will help her when morning dawns." - Psalm 46:4-5

<sup>7</sup> "This means that his separate purity, the way he is distinguished from all other things by his utter devotion to righteousness and love, to his own character, is the seat of his power, the throne of his judgment, and the wisdom of his governing authority." - James M. Hamilton, Jr, *Psalms*, 481.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Nebuchadnezzar's hymn of praise to the Lord in Daniel 4. "At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, 'What have you done?'" - Daniel 4:34-35

that neither Jews nor Gentiles could measure up to God's Law.<sup>9</sup> Thus, to those who were paying attention, it would be clear that the Jews did not just need a Messiah who would save them from the political oppression of the Gentiles, but from God's own justice. If it were not for God's justice, the Jews would never have been exiled and left to suffer under Gentile oppression to begin with.

- ii. This is what the liberation theologians usually miss: oppression is a symptom of the primary problem, not the primary problem itself. As long as this world is under God's just curse for sin, there will continue to be prideful human hearts that pour contempt and cruelty on others.<sup>10</sup> There is therefore no hope of perfect peace and rest from evil until Christ returns.
- b. All of this should lead us to appreciate more deeply the beauty of what Paul says in Ephesians 3, "When you read this, you can perceive my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel. Of this gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace, which was given me by the working of his power." - Ephesians 3:4-7
    - i. It was at one time a mystery, as we have seen, how God would bring the Gentiles to worship himself, but no longer! It has now been revealed to us, and we see it especially in the ministry of Paul himself.<sup>11</sup> Throughout Acts and in his letters, Paul preaches the Gospel that reconciles sinners with God and, as a result, Jews to Gentiles. Many churches that he plants are born out of a synagogue and then come to include an even greater number of Gentiles than Jews! Through the Gospel, the Holy Spirit gave these ancient enemies the grace to forgive one another and break bread together. Even today, Christians from vastly different backgrounds can become close friends and even marry if they share this faith in common. There are Korean missionaries who preach in Japan without any bitterness for their brutal oppression. There are now African ministers who graciously rebuke the churches of their colonizers for compromising on homosexuality. All of this is part of the fulfillment of Psalm 47.
    - ii. The final fulfillment of Psalm 47 will only take place after the last battle which is foreshadowed in Psalm 46. Once God has unmade the original creation in its fallen state, he will make all things new in Jesus Christ. And John says of the New Jerusalem, at the heart of the New Creation, "By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations." - Revelation 21:24-26

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<sup>9</sup> The Exile proves what Paul says in Romans 3 better than any other single event in the Old Testament. "Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." - Romans 3:19-20

<sup>10</sup> "If you see in a province the oppression of the poor and the violation of justice and righteousness, do not be amazed at the matter, for the high official is watched by a higher, and there are yet higher ones over them." - Ecclesiastes 5:8. Note that the most common Hebrew expression for pride is being "high," so in this verse the Preacher is connecting oppression to pride in the human heart, which tends to increase as you go higher up the hierarchies of power in human societies.

<sup>11</sup> Consider also Ephesians 2:11-22 and Galatians 3:28-29.