

Psalm 99

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[0 : 00] Well, it's an absolute privilege to be able to speak about God's Word today and to open up the passage that Adi has just read to us. A passage that reminds us of God reigning and our holy and awesome God.

Let's pray as we open up his Word and think about this, God. Father God, we are struck by your awesomeness and greatness as described in this psalm.

Now, you are holy and in and of ourselves we are so weak and feeble. How can we find words to describe and understand your greatness and awesomeness?

We ask that your Holy Spirit might speak into the hearts and lives of each one of us as we seek to use our limited language and understanding to comprehend again in some way the greatness of you, our God.

Amen. So this isn't necessarily the psalm that I would choose to speak on if you'd given me a choice of some of the psalms round about. I suspect that I would have instinctively maybe gone for the one before or the one after.

[1 : 17] It's sandwiched in between two that just seems so full of joy. You can have a look at them again. You heard about Ian speaking on Psalm 98 last week where we're singing new songs, where we're shouting for joy to the Lord all the earth, where we're bursting into song with music, where we're not even just doing Gary's metaphorical dancing.

It sounds like there's literal dancing going on there in Psalm 98 with harps, with singing, with trumpets, with shouting. Goodness, there's even clapping of hands. At least the rivers are clapping their hands.

That's all going on in Psalm 98. And then you go on to Psalm 100 and we're shouting for joy to the Lord again. We are glad. We've got joyful songs.

We've got thanksgiving. We've got praise. And we've got references to God's unending love and faithfulness. And then right in the middle, we've got Psalm 99, which repeats again and again.

If you see it there, it's at the end of verse 3. Praising your great and awesome name for he is holy. And then verse 5 again, worshipping the Lord who is holy.

[2 : 28] And then again verse 9, exalting the Lord our God, worshipping in his holy mountain for the Lord our God is holy. Almost like a chorus that comes three times in this Psalm.

A reminder that this great and awesome God is holy. And I don't think Psalm 99 is intended to be a particular break in our worship and in our joyful celebration of the living God that we see in Psalm 98 and that we see again in Psalm 100.

Rather, Psalm 99 forms an integral part of this invitation. This invitation that extends to all of us today to worship a great and glorious God.

And as we look at this Psalm through the lens of what Jesus has done for each of us and through the teaching of the whole of Scripture, we are able, through Jesus, to approach this great, holy and awesome God with boldness and with confidence.

So let me share three things that I hope we might all take away from spending a few minutes together in this Psalm. First, I hope we might be encouraged to have a bigger view of who God is.

[3 : 57] Second, a confidence in his goodness no matter what is going on around us. And third, a certainty that he hears and answers our prayers.

And I think for many of us that's what we need to have. Maybe it's one or two or three of these things that we particularly need to have spoken into our hearts and lives today.

A bigger picture of who he is. A confidence in his goodness no matter what is going on around us. And a certainty that he hears and answers our prayers.

Alistair and Sabina, you've really challenged us through what you have brought to us already today. And you guys could have had the whole service and it would have been so helpful for us.

And I just pray that what we're looking at in Psalm 99 might serve to complement the challenge that you have already brought to us. Particularly as we think about this bigger picture of who God is.

[4 : 56] Let's drill into verses 1 to 3 which I think will help us have this bigger picture of who God is. Just look at some of the words that are used to describe what and who God is.

There in verse 1, he reigns and let the nations tremble. Later in verse 1, he sits enthroned between the cherubim and let the earth shake.

There at the start of verse 2, he is great in Zion. As we go on in verse 2, he is exalted over all the nations.

Verse 3, we should praise his great and his awesome name for he is holy. Just allow some of these words to sink into our hearts and our souls this morning.

I wonder if we have recognised in our to-ing and our fro-ing this week, this month, and as we think about the future, that the Lord reigns.

[6 : 06] That he is enthroned. That he is great. That he is exalted over all. That he is awesome. And that he is holy.

And we're invited to worship this God. One of the definitions of worship that I've come across this week that I particularly liked was this.

To worship is to remember who owns the house. It struck me because I'm just back from a week, hence the very red face and head.

Just back from a week in Arran where we had lots of rain but we finally had two days of sweltering sunshine. And you know, in Arran, the reality is, I think we can say this, that we own a house.

Yes, we own a house. The trouble is we own it along with about 50 other people. We own that house for seven days out of 365 days of the year.

[7 : 07] Now we very much enjoy it for those seven days. But at the end of the seven days, that house is no longer ours. At the end of that seven days, our 2% of the ownership of the year is gone.

And the other 98% of owners take their way. We're hardly driving the car away while the next car is coming in. Those who can also say that they own that house.

And in contrast to our partial ownership, our tiny sliver of ownership of that house in Arran, we approach the God and are reminded in verse 1 to 3 that he is the one who owns it all.

He owns the ground on which the house is built. He owns the hills and mountains that surround it. He is the one who is holy, ruling, reigning, and set apart.

Take a coin, take a banknote. What do you see today if you look at it? You see the head of the queen. And we see that as a reminder that she is the one who is, at least in ceremonial terms, the one who is the ruling and reigning monarch in our country.

[8 : 24] Every single note, every single coin, her head is there. I wonder if we recognize that even the breath we take is a gift from the God who owns everything.

As I've tried to reflect on these verses in Psalm 1 to 3, I've realized that so many of our songs of worship seek to capture our hearts with the truths that are in these verses.

And I've felt that in some ways they are easier sung than preached, these truths. So let me share with you some of the songs that have been in my mind, and one or two of them have been sung already today.

How great is our God. Sing with me how great is our God. And all will see how great, how great is our God.

It's there, isn't it? Great is the Lord, verse 2. Name above all names, worthy of our praise. My heart will sing how great is our God.

[9 : 35] Is that what some of us need to be reminded of today? Have some of us lost sight of the fact that our God is great? Maybe it's part of that fear of sharing our faith in Jesus that Alistair and Sabina have challenged about.

I wonder if the antidote to that is a reminder of how great our God is. Verse 1, the Lord reigns.

Does that bring back to mind for some a song that you might not have sung for ages? Our God reigns. He was despised and we took no account of him. Yet now he reigns with the Most High.

Out of the tomb he came with grace and majesty. He is alive. He is alive. God loves us so. See here his hands, his feet, his side.

Yes, we know he is alive. Our God reigns. Our God reigns. Staying with verse 1, he sits enthroned.

[10 : 35] The song that came to mind there that will maybe be in the minds of some of you. God is still on his throne. And he will remember his own. Though trials may press us and burdens distress us, he never will leave us alone.

His promise is true. He will not forget you. God is still on his throne. And verse 3 invites us to praise the great and awesome name of God.

And verse 9 encourages us to worship at his holy mountain. And a song that's been a favourite of mine over many years says, Great is the Lord and most worthy of praise.

The city of our God, the holy place, the joy of the whole earth. Great is the Lord in whom we have the victory. He aids us against the enemy.

We bow down on our knees. And Lord, we want to lift your name on high. And Lord, we want to thank you for the works you've done in our lives. And Lord, we trust in your unfailing love.

[11 : 45] For you alone are God eternal throughout earth and heaven above. I thank God for the wonderful songs of worship that he has given us as individuals and as a church to sing to him.

And we're blessed and thank you to our musicians and worship leaders and those who make sure we can hear it all clearly. Who week by week are enabling us to sing songs that remind us of our great and our awesome and our powerful God.

Elizabeth and I and the boys were at a tiny little church last week in Aran. Where, do you know, we got the decided sense as we sat through the service that no one was singing.

The hymn books were there. The numbers were turned to. But you couldn't hear a sound. And folks, as we think of our great God and as we are invited to worship him.

And of course we know that worship is much more than singing. But worship, as we see from these three psalms, absolutely includes singing. Can I encourage us to be people who find all the songs possible.

[13 : 01] New, old, familiar, unfamiliar. To sing praises to our great and awesome gods. Let's sing them on a Sunday.

But folks, let's not restrict it to singing it only on a Sunday. Let's play them and sing them and hum them and read them and watch them day after day.

Because it's some of these songs of worship that can turn our hearts and minds back to the greatness and awesomeness of God. Who we are so prone to have becoming smaller rather than larger in our own minds.

It's only fairly recently I've discovered the joy of some of the YouTube worship videos. I love to see the fact that millions and millions of people have watched some of these worship videos by groups like Hillsong and many others.

Music streaming services probably making it easier than ever for us just to tune in to some of the songs that the church globally are using to worship our great and our awesome gods.

[14 : 08] Let's make sure that we are taking every opportunity today and in the days ahead to tune our hearts and minds to the fact that our God reigns.

He sits in thrones. He is great. He is exalted over all the nations. And he is holy. But let me move to my second point today.

We do not only need to recognise that God is great and holy. We also need to have confidence in his goodness no matter what is going on round about us.

You see it would be possible wouldn't it for us to be thinking about a mighty ruler who is corrupt. Who is totalitarian.

Who is only to be feared. And maybe our minds go to some of the regimes that we can think of. Whether it's North Korea and some of what we've heard there. Maybe it's some of what we've heard about countries that will not allow their citizens to choose to worship and serve Jesus.

[15 : 21] But they will be in fear of their life. And it's very easy to think about this awesome rule and reign. And for it simply to evoke fear.

Which is why I'm delighted when we come to verse 4. We read the king is mighty. But he is also just. He is mighty.

But he loves justice. You have established equity or fairness. This all powerful and all reigning one.

Is not unpredictable. But is one who is just and fair. One of the films that we watched over the course of the week was now a relatively old one.

It was The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. That great film that captures the brilliant book by C.S. Lewis. Part of the Narnia series.

[16 : 22] And there was a line towards the end of the film. And I've been thinking about this message. Which just thought. Oh that's brilliant. This just slots it in place for me. As we try and think through the balance between the greatness and awesomeness of God.

But the fact that he invites us to approach him and to recognise his justice. Susan is speaking to Mr Beaver.

And Susan says Aslan. Aslan for those who are not familiar. Aslan is the lion that represents God. And who dies. So a picture of Christ. And rises again.

Susan speaking to Mr Beaver says. Aslan is a lion. The lion. The great lion. Oh said Susan. I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe?

I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion. Safe? Said Mr Beaver. Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe.

[17 : 25] But he's good. He's the king. I tell you. This great God. Not safe. You don't look at verses 1 to 3. And think oh here's a God who is safe.

But we look at the psalm as a whole. Here's a God who is good. You're rich in love. And you're slow to anger. And then this little couplet.

Your name is great. And your heart is kind. Your name is great. And your heart is kind. For all your goodness I will keep on singing.

10,000 reasons for my heart to find. Bless the Lord. Oh my soul. Worship his holy name. Sing like never before. Oh my soul.

I'll worship your holy name. Some of us may be facing great uncertainty about the days ahead. We have no idea what the future will hold.

[18 : 27] Some of us come deeply worried about our own health. About that of close family and friends.

About death. About life. We come to this psalm and we recognise that we are small and in many respects insignificant and not powerful.

We experience at times what seems like the world crashing in around us. Part of my summer reading is a brilliant book by a guy who was a neurosurgeon and a neuroscientist in America.

A book called When Breath Becomes Air. Any of you come across it? If not, highly recommend it. I'm glad to see one of the doctors has at least. Paul Califani, I think his name is too, if you've read it, When Breath Becomes Air.

There he is in his 30s as a brilliant doctor who has poured his heart and life into his medicine. Who is passionate about bringing healing and new hope to those who are desperately ill.

[19 : 38] And then bang. He gets the diagnosis that he himself is dying of lung cancer. And describes powerfully and eloquently his journey and indeed his life and his death as he comes to terms with what's going on.

And indeed it seems it also recaptures something of his Christian faith. Although the book is not necessarily a Christian book. But reading that certainly reminded me again of what we're reading about and the themes in this psalm.

We are not strong. We are not powerful. In contrast to our God, we do not know what will happen at the end of this day. Let alone all that the future holds.

But we are invited in worship and surrender today to come to this God who is not safe but who is good.

And to entrust our lives, our present and our future wholly to him. And to say, God, you are the one who reigns.

[20 : 51] You are the one who is great and exalted. My life is in your hand and I am happy that it is staying and it is safe there.

And so we can have confidence in the goodness of this king as well as his greatness. And then my third point today.

He is also the one who is great. He is the one who is good. And he is the one who hears and answers our prayers. Let's look through the rest of the psalm.

Verse 5. Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his footstool. He is holy. Verse 6. 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 decrees he gave them. Verse 8 again.

[21 : 52] O Lord our God, you answered them. Do you see that repeated? Verse 6. They called on the Lord, he answered them. Verse 8. O Lord our God, you answered them.

You were to Israel a forgiving God, though you punished their misdeeds. And so we're taking on this tour of some of God's prophets. Moses, Aaron, Samuel.

And we're reminded of the fact that these were people who themselves were not powerful. Themselves were not able to meet the needs of those who they were ministering to.

But they called on his name and God answered. We're reminded of Exodus chapter 16 and Exodus chapter 17 here.

Where the people are crying out for food and Moses calls out and God provides the manna and the quail. Exodus 17. The people are thirsty and they're complaining and Moses calls out and God answers and provides water from the rock.

[23 : 00] And explicitly we're reminded that God speaks to them from the pillar of cloud that surrounded those people as they made their way through the wilderness towards the promised land.

And if that was the experience of these prophets and of these people that they called out to God and he answered them. Then very simply I hope that we today can be assured that we too can call out to God.

And he will hear an answer. We don't need Moses. We don't need a prophet to be doing the asking for us.

Let's not forget what we reflected on just a few weeks ago as we read in Romans chapter 8. Do you remember Romans chapter 8 verse 26? In the same way the spirit helps us in our weakness.

We don't know what we ought to pray for. But the spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. We have the assurance from Jesus that we should keep asking, keep seeking and keep knocking.

[24 : 10] He said, which of you if your son asks for bread will give him a stone or if he asks for fish will give him a snake. If you then though you are evil know how to give good gifts to your children.

How much more will your father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him? I wonder if we are taking the time to really pour out our requests to our gods.

Who wants to hear them and who promises. And we can take it from Psalm 99 that whenever he has been asked, he has always answered.

I wonder if as we think about life now, for some of us we may be struggling through life by ourselves. Rather than reaching out to him with our requests, big and small.

Confident that he will hear and that he will answer. I want to finish with just three quotes that have struck me in recent days.

[25 : 25] From three authors who I have found helpful that I think will just unpack a little more of what is in this psalm. Firstly, I think it's really important that we recognise that we look at this psalm through the reality of all that Jesus Christ has now done for us.

Millions of people will have heard this psalm read, sung and will have read it themselves over thousands of years. Isn't that remarkable? Isn't that remarkable? These psalms, thousands of years old, read and heard by millions upon millions of our fellow human beings walking this earth.

For those first hearing it, their worship would largely have been at the temple. For us now, listen to what Rabbi Zacharias says.

There are now no unique postures and times and limitations that restrict our access to God. My relationship with God is intimate and personal.

The Christian does not go to the temple to worship. The Christian takes the temple with him or her. Jesus lifts us beyond any building and pays the human body the highest compliment by making it his dwelling place.

[26 : 59] The place where he meets with us. Right here, right now, wherever this week might take us. Wherever the rest of the year and the years ahead might take us.

Through Christ we are invited to access this great and awesome God. And indeed we are assured that he comes and dwells within. We worship God for his greatness.

Yes. We worship God for his goodness and his justice as reflected in this psalm. Yes. But we worship God perhaps most precious for the salvation that he has offered us in Christ.

We must keep our eyes on Jesus, his cross and forgiveness. And allow that to be the thing that keeps taking us back to worship.

Tom Wright says this. If your idea of God and if your idea of the salvation offered in Christ is vague or remote.

[28 : 09] Then your idea of worship will be fuzzy and ill-informed. But the closer you get to the truth, the clearer becomes the beauty.

And the more you will find worship welling up within you. That's why theology and worship belong together. The one isn't just a head trip.

The other isn't just emotion. I love that quote because we really put a great priority in this church here of unpacking God's word and seeking to understand what God's word has to say for us.

The closer you get to the truth, the closer you get to the truth, the clearer becomes the beauty. And the more you will find worship welling up within you.

And finally, worshipping this big, awesome, mighty, reigning God frees from living small, puny and self-absorbed lives.

[29 : 13] Listen to John Ortberg who said this. I need to worship because without it I can forget that I have a big God beside me and live in fear.

I need to worship because without it I can forget his calling and begin to live in a spirit of self-preoccupation. I need to worship because without it I lose a sense of wonder and gratitude and plod through life with blinkers on.

I need to worship because my natural tendency is towards self-reliance and stubborn independence.

Let's worship this great God today and in all the days ahead. Let's pray. Show us something great and mighty God of who you are.

Help us not to live lives which seek to be independent, which seek to be self-reliant. But may we all throw ourselves, our present and our future entirely on you, God.

[30 : 38] Thanking you that you are great and you are good. But thanking you most of all that you have offered us salvation through Jesus Christ.

We worship you this day. Amen.