

“The Witness of Worship” (Psalm 96:1–13)

This past summer, a 54-year-old Florida man rammed his car into a church, telling officers that he wanted to be “closer to Jesus.” Officers found Phillip Wagner’s car partially inside the Faith United Methodist Church when they arrived on the scene. The damage to the church was estimated at about \$10,000 and Wagner was put in the county jail on suicide watch.¹

Perhaps this account leads you to shake your head. While I can understand your response, there’s something to be learned from this sad episode. If you want to be closer to Jesus, draw closer to a local church. We live in a day and age when there’s a complete disconnect between being close to Jesus and worshipping Him in a local church. I would dare say that this is one of the reasons that the church in the Pacific Northwest is so anemic. Here in our region, many Christians see no correlation between worshipping God with other believers and walking with God. So when things don’t go well in their lives they drop out of church. If they become busy with life and their children’s activities, they abandon church. Gordon Dahl wrote, “Most middle-class Americans tend to worship their work, work at their play, and play at their worship.” How true! With family, church, job, and school responsibilities, it can be hard to be devoted to corporate worship. But this is only because we’ve failed to recognize two truths: the greatness of our God and the demand for worship

Psalm 96 is a universal call to praise the Lord—all people and all creation are invited to join in!² This psalm belongs to a group of psalms (93–100) united by genre and motif. These psalms affirm Yahweh’s rule over the earth (see 93:1: “The Lord reigns”). They are called enthronement psalms.³ The implication is we ought to worship the Lord because He is a great God. No less than seven times in the psalm, the psalmist instructs believers to tell the nations of Yahweh their King and invite them to join in His praise (96:1, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10). This chapter sings and shouts: *Our worship is a witness*. It’s a witness to God and humankind. Ps 96 provides three ways our worship can be a witness.

1. Sing to the Lord (96:1–6). Since there’s only one true God, Yahweh, the God of the Bible, we’re to sing to Him with all that is within us. Verses 1–3 exhort us to sing; verses 4–6 give the reasons why we should sing. The first three verses contain three exhortations to sing. Verse 1 says, “**Sing to the Lord a new song.**” Now for those of you, like me, who haven’t been gifted with a singing voice, take heart! The Lord loves to hear His people sing, even those who sing horribly out of key. Martin Luther used to say, “The Devil dreads a singing Christian.” So if you don’t sing like an angel, that’s okay. At least try and annoy the Devil! He hates it when a child of God sings. But he especially detests it when a church sings. What does the psalmist mean by “a new song?”⁴ Exhortations to sing a “new song” are usually in response to acts of the Lord that demonstrate his reign. Such is the case here, as evidenced by verses 2 and 3 and the rest of the psalm. Furthermore, every day we ought to have something new to praise God for. Jeremiah wrote in Lamentations 3:22–23, “The Lord’s lovingkindnesses never cease, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning. Great is Your faithfulness.”⁵ In light of who God is and what He’s done we better have a new song to sing! His praise is absolutely inexhaustible!

“Sing to the Lord all the earth.”

The first three lines are an exhortation to worship the Lord. The second three lines are an exhortation to tell the peoples—the Gentiles—about the Lord. If the inhabitants of the earth are to worship the Lord, they must be told about the Lord.

In case you thought that the exhortation to sing was a mistake the psalmist repeats himself for the third time in 96:2. Notice that he includes that we are to “**bless His name.**” This means if we are to sing and worship God we must know who He is and what He has done. We’re to be students of the character and works of God. The phrase “**His name**” is significant. It’s also used again in 96:8. In these thirteen verses

the psalmist addresses the Lord as “**Yahweh**” eleven times. This name is used over 6,000 times throughout the Old Testament.⁶ So what does the name Yahweh mean? In Exodus 3:14, we learn that it’s shorthand for “I am that I am.” This definition given by the Lord simply means that He is eternal. The name specifically refers to God’s activity in the book of Exodus. He is the sovereign, all-powerful deliverer of God’s people. If we’re to worship the right God we must know His name: Yahweh. It would also be helpful to know the other names that He is known by throughout the Bible. Are you looking for a new Bible study? You might want to consider the names of God. I wholeheartedly recommend the book, *The Names of God* by Ann Spangler. Ann is a great Bible student, but my PhD supervisor helped her with her Hebrew and Greek.

“Who is to sing to the Lord?”

“Why are we to sing to the Lord?”

Paralleling the threefold call to sing to the Lord are three imperatives of the opening verses. We are instructed to “bless His name,” “proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day,” and “tell His glory among the nations.” All three imperatives require us to speak a word on God’s behalf, for it is the spoken testimony that explains God’s glory to those who do not acknowledge Him.⁷

Knowledge must precede worship.⁸

The psalmist concludes 96:2 by urging us to “**proclaim good tidings of His salvation from day to day.**” So all of a sudden worship turns to witness. Not only are we to sing, we’re to proclaim God’s salvation. In this context, the word “**salvation**” isn’t referring to deliverance from hell; it’s speaking of Yahweh’s triumph in creation (see esp. 96:5) and His unbroken rule.⁹ And please notice that we’re to proclaim God’s great works “**day by day**” (i.e., habitual activity). A second aspect of worship is our verbal witness. We’re to worship by our words. There may be a lesson hidden in this sequence (first upwards to God, then outwards to man): a corrective to static worship and shallow preaching alike.

In 96:3, we’re exhorted to “**Tell of His glory among the nations, His wonderful deeds among all the peoples.**” The word “**tell**” () literally means “to recount something.”¹⁰ We’re to recount God’s glory and His wonderful deeds. We’re always to remember who God is and what He has done. Having been informed of three ways to worship in 96:1–3, the psalmist now shares with us three motives for worship in 96:4–6. The three motives are: (1) the fear of the Lord, (2) the fact of the Lord, and (3) the fame of the Lord.

Beginning with the word “for” in verse 4, the psalmist further explains why the Gentiles should worship the Lord and why the Israelites should tell the Gentiles about the Lord. Verse 4 reads: “**For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; He is to be feared above all gods.**” The first thing that should move us to worship and witness is the fear of the Lord. It is not enough to verbally affirm that we have reverential awe for God. This is incomplete. God is to be feared, honored, and elevated as the great Lord who is most worthy of praise. This means that we approach God as the holy and righteous God that He is.

We should also be moved by **the mere fact of the Lord**. Verse 5 reads, “**For all the gods of the peoples are idols,¹¹ but the LORD made the heavens.**” This phrase is a play on words. The Hebrew term for “idols,” *elilim*, means “worthless” and sounds like the word for “gods,” *elohim*. The sound play draws attention to the statement.¹² We should worship and fear God out of a sense of awe for His supreme, almighty power as the Creator God. The psalmist reminds us that there is no such thing as other gods—they are inconsequential idols that have nothing on God. In fact the word “**idols**” can be translated

“nobodies.” I like that! Despite what some may say, God is alive and well and this fact alone should drive us to worship Him. Before we move on please notice that the psalmist declares, **“The Lord made the heavens.”** We dare not skim over this too quickly. Throughout the Bible the Lord emphasizes the fact that He has created the heavens and the earth. In fact almost without fail, whenever the Lord wants to demonstrate who He is, He brings up creation. If you’d like some practical sermon homework, step out of your house some time today and worship God in His creation.

Our last motive follows in 96:6: the fame of the Lord. **“Splendor and majesty are before Him; strength and glory are in His sanctuary.”** We’re to sing and proclaim God’s fame. We’re to esteem and elevate Him for His numerous and perfect attributes. There should be nothing more important in this world than God’s renown. As we do this God will touch down in our lives and use us powerfully as His witnesses.

[We have read that Yahweh is Creator; now in 96:7–9 we’ll see that . . .]

2. Give to the Lord (96:7–9). In verse 7, the psalmist resumes calling the Gentiles to worship. Three lines begin with the words “ascribe to the Lord,” just as the first three lines began with the words “sing to the Lord.” The Psalmist continues his tune, only this time in 96:7–8 he says three times that we are to **“ascribe to the Lord.”** The word **“ascribe”** () literally means “give.” It does not imply that we can give God something that He is lacking. Rather, the idea is that we are to offer God worship that is commensurate with His infinite majesty and glory. It means “to acknowledge or proclaim—to offer a concrete expression of praise to God.” In 96:7, we’re to **“ascribe to the Lord glory and strength”** because He is the King! And notice the Lord includes the families of the peoples. God’s missionary heartbeat is evident in this Psalm. Verse 8 tells us that we’re to give the Lord the glory due His name! Once again we see an emphasis on God’s name. As we observed in 96:2, if we’re to worship God we must know who He is and what He has done.

Verse 8 goes on to say that we are to bring an offering when we come into His courts. The word **“offering”** can also be translated “gift.” So the idea is of bringing a gift to the Lord. Why? Because He is the King! Whoever heard of worship that doesn’t cost? The only worship that is worth offering God is worship that costs us. David said long ago that he would not offer the Lord a sacrifice of worship that cost him nothing. He recognized God as King.

Not only must we bring an offering, we must also bring a holy and humble heart. We are told in 96:9 to worship the Lord in the splendor of His holiness and to tremble before Him. God often talks about the holiness of His worshippers. We cannot worship a God who is “holy, holy, holy,” unless we come before Him in holiness. We must worship Him with a holy and humble heart. Verse 9 goes on to say that all the earth is to tremble before Him. The word translated **“tremble”** literally means “to be pained.”¹³ God takes His worship seriously because it both pleases Him and also is a witness to the world around us.

[We have seen that Yahweh is not only Creator and King but in 96:10–13, the psalmist tells us that . . .]

3. Submit to the Lord (96:10–13). If the Lord truly reigns and He’s coming in judgment, we need to submit to Him now. This psalm opens with a triple invitation to sing to the Lord followed by a triple imperative to speak His praise, and it ends with a triple statement that the whole world will praise God (96:11–12a). In 96:10, the psalmist writes, **“The LORD reigns; indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved; He will judge the peoples with equity.”** This verse references the power and sovereignty of our great God. Everything is under His control because He reigns and has established it all. In light of this He has the right and authority to judge all the people of the earth. Yet, He promises that He will judge fairly. Verses 11–12 let us know that the earth and all that is in it are

worshipping God, therefore, we too better get involved in worshipping the great Lord and Judge. Ultimately, why should we worship God? Why should we declare him Creator and King? Our text gives us the reason: because He is Judge. The first phrase of 96:13 ends with the statement, “for He comes”; the second phrase of the verse begins with the same statement “He comes.” This repetition underscores the assurance of God’s sovereignty as expressed in His certain return.¹⁴ Verse 13 affirms the reality that God will judge the entire world in righteousness and truth.¹⁵ We can count on it! One of the things that this judgment will be based upon is our worship.

These verses remind us of Paul’s comments in Romans 8:19- 22, that the creation presently groans under the curse, waiting for the day of redemption when it will be restored. The Lord’s coming to judge the earth refers to the coming of Messiah, who is God. Three terms describe this future judgment: equity, righteousness, and faithfulness (96:10, 13). *Equity* means that God’s judgment will be fair. No one will be judged unfairly. Everyone who does not receive mercy will receive perfect justice. *Righteousness* refers to God’s perfect standard, which is Himself. He has revealed His righteousness in His Word. He will not judge on the curve of human goodness, but according to the absolute standards of His own righteous nature. *Faithfulness* can also be translated as *truth*. It means that He will not be arbitrary or whimsical in His judgment. He will judge each person faithfully and truthfully.

What kind of worshipper are you? The Psalms insist that worship is an action. We are never told to worship the Lord apart from actively doing something. That’s because worship is not a state of being verb; it’s not static or passive. What will we commit to doing today? How will we leave this auditorium somehow changed? Let’s go back through our text and see how we can practically fulfill our ultimate responsibility to God.

In 96:1–2, we’re exhorted to sing. Now at Emmanuel, I’m proud to say that this body sings. Yet I want to challenge each one of us to sing for the Lord at all times. If the only time you really sing is when you attend “Vertical Praise” or when hymns are being sung on Sunday morning I can tell you right now you’re not a biblical worshipper. Biblical worshippers are able to worship God even when their preferences are not being met. Stop for just a moment and think. Worship is for God’s pleasure and benefit. It’s about His glorification not our satisfaction! We’re to worship God at every opportunity whether we enjoy the song or not. Our challenge is to sing our hearts out to the Lord. Not just at the conclusion of this message but each and every week, and each and every day, corporately and individually.

In 96:2, we also note that we’re to proclaim. We’re to be witnesses. We need to constantly remind ourselves that we have a lot of people watching how we live. Even though we may not always be aware of it there are unsaved people watching and waiting to see if our God is all He’s cracked up to be. They can receive a witness through our words and deeds. In addition to that we’re to be a witness even to saints. Each of us is looked to for spiritual leadership of one kind or another. We have brothers and sisters who respect us and look to us for answers. We can really be used by God to burn into them a desire to worship God. Let’s commit today that *our worship will be a witness*.

Verse 3 tells us that we’re also to recount. We’re to continually dwell on who God is and all that He’s done. We’re to encourage ourselves by thinking on these things and we’re also to share with others. A great exercise to cultivate this would be to begin a Daily Prayer Journal or a journal compiling the attributes of God. This would always keep before us the greatness of God.

In 96:7–8, we’re told to ascribe or give God gifts out of a sacrificial heart. This means that we are to give of our financial resources for the good of the kingdom. Yet I recognize that many of you may be already doing that. If so, are you also giving of your time and talents? In our world time has become the most

valuable commodity. It's fairly easy for many of us to write out a check but to serve in a ministry, well that's another story.

In 96:9, we're to ensure that we're worshipping the Lord in holiness. This means that we do everything in our power to be pure (see Psalm 15). God wants intimate fellowship with us; therefore we must walk in a manner that is worthy of the calling with which we've been called.¹⁶

God has called us to an everlasting preoccupation with Himself. Why? Because He is Creator, King, and Judge. When I was in seminary I took a class called "The Church in Worship." In that class I learned a simple but profound alliteration: "God deserves, desires, and demands our worship!" That's the bottom line. We've been created to worship God. Each of us is a worshipper. The only question that remains is: what kind of worshipper will you be?

There comes a time to express jubilant praise.

Last night, my family joined over seventy people from our church for a minor league baseball game. We watched our hometown Tacoma Rainiers pound the Portland Beavers 8-2.

Scripture References

Psalm 96:1–13

Psalm 95:1–11

Daniel 3:1–30

John 4:23–24

Romans 12:1–2

Philippians 3:3

Revelation 4:9–11

Study Questions

1. How would I have defined worship before studying Psalm 96? In what way(s) has my definition changed? What contemporary lies have I bought into regarding worship? How can I eradicate these lies and help others to have a proper understanding of biblical worship?
2. Do I come to church every Sunday with an earnest desire to worship God (Ps 96:1–2)? How would I describe my singing when my preferences aren't met? How would those standing around me interpret my body language and facial expressions? How can I revise and revive my heart for worshipping God with my church family?
3. How does my understanding of God as Creator affect my worship (Ps 96:3–6)? Do I spend time in creation celebrating God's greatness and vastness? How have my observations about God altered my perspective about who He is? In what ways have I learned to fear God for His person and works?
4. Have I learned to worship God through the giving of my time, talents, and treasures (Ps 96:7–9)? Give concrete examples. When have I offered God some form of sacrificial worship? What did my act of worship cost me? In response to God's Word in Ps 96, what will I give to the Lord this year? Who will hold me accountable to carrying out this commitment?
5. How can I better prepare myself to enter into God's presence for the purpose of worship (Ps 96:10–13)? If I knew Jesus was returning this week, what would I do differently? How would His soon return affect the way I worship? What will it take for me to live like this today?

Notes

¹ SermonNews, “Man Rams Car into Church to be ‘Closer to Jesus’”: News-Press.com, June 29, 2009, anon. www.sermonnews.com.

² It is interesting that Psalm 96 is found with very few changes in 1 Chron 16:23–33. The occasion was the time when David first moved the ark of the Lord to its resting-place of honor in the city of Jerusalem. It is also worth noting that Ps 96 follows Ps 95, which describes the stubborn hard-heartedness of Israel in the wilderness, in spite of God’s goodness towards them. It was the same hardhearted nation that later rejected her Messiah, leading to the gospel going out to the Gentiles (Matt 21:43; Acts 13:46). So Pss 95 and 96 form a pair, showing Israel’s rejection of the gospel and the subsequent missionary task of proclaiming the gospel to the Gentiles. The structure of Ps 96 falls into several parts:

A. Proclamation of Universal Praise (vv. 1-3)

B. The Majesty of the Lord (vv. 4-6)

A'. Proclamation of Universal Praise (vv. 7-9)

B'. The Rule of the Lord (vv. 10-13).

³ Pss 96–99, in particular, are *Enthronement Psalms*. These are psalms that anticipate the coming of the Lord and the consummation of His Kingdom as fulfilled in the person of Messiah, Christ.

⁴ Pss 33:3; 40:3; 98:1.

⁵ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1975), 347.

⁶ You can know that this name of God is being used because most of our English translations spell “LORD” in all capital letters.

⁷ Michael E. Travers, *Encountering God in the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003), 170.

⁸ Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 165.

⁹ A.A. Anderson, *Psalms 73–150. The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 682.

¹⁰ BDB s.v.

¹¹ *Paronomasia*: This refers to the use or repetition of words that are similar in sound, but not necessarily in sense or meaning in order to achieve a certain effect. This can only be observed by those who can read the original Hebrew text. Ps 96:5 reads, “For all the gods (*kol-elohay*) of the nations are idols (*elilim*). This latter word means nothings, or things of naught; so that we might render it, “The gods of the nations or imaginations” (see also Ps 22:16; Prov 6:23).

¹² See NET study notes.

¹³ BDB s.v.

¹⁴ Travers, *Encountering God in the Psalms*, 173.

¹⁵ The NET study notes read: “The verbal forms in v. 13 probably describe God’s typical, characteristic behavior, though they may depict in dramatic fashion the outworking of divine judgment or anticipate a future judgment of worldwide proportions, in which case they could be translated ‘will judge the world.’”

¹⁶ See Eph 4:1; Phil 1:27; Col 1:10; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Thess 1:5, 11.