

## **God Rules** **Psalm 97**

As the average Australian looks at their world, what do they think holds it all together?

- Perhaps it's the big corporations – they're always coming up with new ideas; they keep pushing us forward; they keep our economies going. But then a big economic crisis comes along – a stock market crash, a worldwide downturn in consumer demand – and they realise the big corporations don't always have everything their own way.
- Perhaps it's the politicians – not ours, of course – we're just a very small fish in a very big pond. The Barrack Obamas and the Hu Jintaos of this world – they sneeze and the world catches a cold. But they don't always seem to have a grip on everything – despite their best efforts, much in the world spirals out of control.
- Maybe it's not people – maybe it's something else. Maybe scientific laws – maybe they hold everything together; keep everything running on track. But over the last few decades, people have questioned whether science is all it's cracked up to be. It's not they think science is wrong or should be abandoned – just that it doesn't answer some fairly significant questions; it's not the be-all and end-all that holds everything together.
- Perhaps nature – many think of nature as an entity in itself – or, I should say, herself: for it always seems to be Mother Nature in view. She works away in the background keeping everything going, keeping everyone in line. But many now question whether Mother Nature can cope any more with

humanity's destructive tendencies. We've beaten her into submission and she's given up.

Could it be God – could He be the One who holds it all together? I suspect the average Australian no longer thinks in those terms. They may very well believe in some sort of god out there somewhere – but, at best, he's distant. He's not involved in the everyday. He's not needed on a moment-by-moment basis. He's what we may call the god-of-the-gaps – and over the last 100 years the gaps have got progressively smaller.

- Science explained how everything worked and we no longer needed God to provide the sun and the rain and the harvests.
- Doctors forged ahead with medical discoveries and we no longer needed God to heal us from a whole range of medical conditions.
- Engineers developed dams and fridges and we no longer needed God to give us relief from drought.

People could just get on with life and have no need to bother God – or indeed to be bothered about God. They even had a whole new range of incredible entertainments to keep them occupied. Over time, God's shrunk – at least in the way people think about Him. It's as if people have put God in a box and over time they've made the box smaller and smaller. Maybe you've even found yourself caught up in this sort of thinking.

### **God's Rule in the World**

Psalm 97 has a much bigger view of God. Verse 1:

*The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad;  
let the distant shores rejoice.*

Yahweh – Israel's God – the God who made the world – He reigns. He reigns over the entire earth. His reign

extends to the distant shores.

How did they come to that conclusion? Was it simply they lived in a pre-scientific and pre-medical age and so it was much easier for them to believe that? What was it like for these guys?

- They lived in a world with quite limited abilities to store food for lengthy periods of time. They depended on the rains each year to produce their crops – and sometimes those rains didn't come.
- They lived in a world where the good didn't always come out on top. We saw that a couple of weeks ago in Psalm 73. They struggled with seeing injustice in their day-to-day lives.
- They lived in a world dominated by powerful empires – the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians. Those empires were much stronger than little old Israel. Those empires had their own gods – gods that appeared to give their followers success.

They were just a small, backwater nation that generally was fairly insignificant. How did they come up with a conclusion like this? How could they keep this belief?

Verse 2:

*Clouds and thick darkness surround Him;  
righteousness and justice are the foundation of His  
throne.*

*Fire goes before Him  
and consumes His foes on every side.*

*His lightning lights up the world;  
the earth sees and trembles.*

*The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,  
before the Lord of all the earth.*

*The heavens proclaim His righteousness,*

*and all the peoples see His glory.*

They believed this about God because it's how God came to them – this is how God revealed Himself to them.

The language here reminds us of Exodus 19. God rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt. He brought them to Mount Sinai and they camped at the foot of the mountain. Then God appeared to them.

*On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. (Ex.19:16-19)*

It's an image of awesome majesty – and in the true sense of the word *awesome*; not the watered-down version we hear so often today. How do you find enough superlatives to describe God? How can you ever fully explain His greatness – and the puny insignificance we should feel in comparison?

In the whole exodus event, Israel learned many things about God.

- They learned He was greater than the Egyptian Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods – for they couldn't stand up to Him when He demonstrated His power.
- They learned He wasn't localised – He could beat the Egyptians on their home-turf, He could turn up in majesty at Mount Sinai; He could give them the land of Canaan.

- They learned He could provide for them as He brought water from rocks and manna from the sky.
- They learned something of His power as the mountain shook when He turned up.
- They learned something of His mystery – that they couldn't see His glory in its fullness for that was too great for them to bear.

And through the revelation He gave them through Moses, they learned even more.

- They learned He's good and holy and righteous and pure – and that had consequences for the way they lived as His people.
- They learned He created the entire universe – so it's all His to do with as He sees fit.
- They learned He didn't abandon His world – but He continues to be active in it, directing it according to His purposes and His plans and His promises.

In short, they learned that God rules. This is His world. It exists for His purposes.

Did they understand everything about His rule? No.

- On the one hand, they're finite and God's infinite. How can the finite hope to understand completely that which is beyond even their imagination?
- On the other hand, God doesn't reveal everything to them. Some things remain hidden. Some things remain mysteries. The book of Job reminds us that.

Yet, they knew enough to affirm God's rule.

One of the consequences of this was they knew it's futile to oppose God. Verse 3:

*Fire goes before Him  
and consumes His foes on every side.*

If when God approaches the very earth trembles – if the mountains melt like wax – why would a puny man be able to stand before Him? Even if you got lots of puny little men and put them all together – still they wouldn't be able to stand against God. It's like Psalm 2 says:

*The kings of the earth take their stand  
and the rulers gather together  
against the LORD  
and against his Anointed One.  
"Let us break their chains," they say,  
"and throw off their fetters."  
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;  
the Lord scoffs at them.*

It's a joke to think that mere mortals could somehow defeat God's rule.

God's rule means those who oppose God's rule are dealt with and judged. God's the One who determines the basis of judgment. God's the One who judges. It is, after all, His universe.

- That's good news if you're one who submits to God's rule. It means you know God will finally make things right and establish His perfect kingdom. It means you know the suffering you go through while waiting for that is nothing compared with what's coming. That's why, according to this psalm you rejoice – and you should rejoice.
- But it's bad news if you're one opposing God's rule. It means you'll be overthrown. Your rebellion will be judged. You'll face God's eternal punishment.

That's the consistent message of the Bible – both the Old Testament and the New Testament. It's the message of the cross.

God's universe isn't a democracy. It's not that we'll get to the end and God'll say:

OK let's have a vote. Let's see if we can come up with something that most of you agree on. Hands up all those in favour of self-centred materialism. Or hands up all those who want to kick murderers out of My kingdom.

It's just not going to work that way. God rules – He's king and sovereign – and He doesn't conform to what we think. He determines what's right and wrong and treats us accordingly.

This is something we affirm by faith. That was the case for Israel. It remains so for us. If you ask:

Can you see God's rule now?

You don't get a clear-cut answer.

- On the one hand, you occasionally see God step in and deal with wicked people. Israel saw that in Egypt. She saw it in Canaan. She saw it at times in her history as a nation. She even experienced it herself when she was taken off into exile.
- On the other hand, you get the situation of Psalm 73. You can see the wicked prosper in this life. God doesn't always strike them down – either at the individual level or the national level. And God's people sometimes suffer badly during their lives on earth. It's easy to think God's rule isn't working out very well.

It's something we affirm by faith.

And it goes further than that. It's easy to think God's created the world and then left it to run all by itself. We talk about the laws of science and the laws of nature. We think of them as somehow self-existent – that things in

our world just run merrily along according to these laws. God's not necessary – except to fill in the gaps. That's not the Bible's view of things. God's universe continues because God wills it to continue. God's involved in what happens on earth. God sends the rain and God withholds the rain. God provides the harvest and God withholds the crops. God provides health and cures sickness. God continues to uphold and sustain all things. God rules. But we only know that because God's told us in His Word. I can't prove it to you from simply observing the world. We affirm it by faith.

One consequence of God's rule is that His people rejoice and His enemies have deep cause for concern. Another consequence is in verse 7:

*All who worship images are put to shame,  
those who boast in idols—  
worship him, all you gods!*

*Zion hears and rejoices  
and the villages of Judah are glad  
because of your judgments, O LORD.*

*For you, O LORD, are the Most High over all the  
earth;  
you are exalted far above all gods.*

If God truly rules as the psalmist says, then there's not much point honouring anything else as god. In Israel's time, many nations had their own gods – gods who were not the true God who created the universe. Where did these gods come from?

- Perhaps demonic spirits deceiving people.
- Perhaps the imaginations of well-meaning thinkers.
- Perhaps the manipulations of some not-so-well meaning leaders.

In the long run, it doesn't much matter. They're all false. They're all made up. They all lead people down a wrong path. None of them are the true God.

Yet, these so-called gods significantly influenced people – influenced the way they thought; influenced the way they lived; influenced their daily rituals. People thought these so-called gods controlled the weather and the fertility of the ground and the chance circumstances of life. They made sacrifices to get these gods onside – to persuade them to do what they wanted them to do. And they became more and more like the gods they honoured.

Such practices are offensive to the one true God.

- There's the fact they don't honour God as God – that's offensive. To take the honour due to their Creator (to the One who's powerful beyond their imaginations) and give that honour to something else – to something lesser, to something made up – is simply monstrous. It's like a child giving Christmas presents to an imaginary father and ignoring their real one.
- And then there's the fact that these made-up religions and philosophies simply aren't true. They're inventions of rebellious people – people who don't want to submit to God's rightful rule; people who want to run their lives without reference to Him. That too is offensive.
- There's also the fact that many of the religious practices themselves associated with these so-called gods were often things the real God called evil. That too is offensive.

People still worship images today.

- Some have literal images – idols and statues. Some still use the idols of the ancient world. Some have some more modern versions.
- Some have less tangible images – things like power and wealth and pleasure and fame. They have images of their own success in one or more of those areas. They worship those images. They submit their lives to them. They're ruled by them – rather than being ruled by the one true God.

God doesn't step in and judge straight away – at least, not in the sense of final judgment. That's still future.

*All who worship images are put to shame ...*

That will happen when Jesus returns and all continuing rebels are overthrown. In the meantime, God does two things.

- First, He calls people to repent – that is, to give up their idolatry and submit to Him – to honour Him as their God.
- Secondly, idolatry has an inbuilt preliminary judgment. People are changed by the images they serve. For example, people who serve wealth are taken over by their god. They become greedy for more and more. Such greed begins to consume them. Their focus becomes one-eyed. Other things in their lives suffer. It should bring them to their senses – if only they weren't blinded by their image, by their god.

### **God's Rule in His People**

God's rule also has implications for His people – for the people who want to live under His rule. Verse 10:

*Let those who love the LORD hate evil,  
for he guards the lives of his faithful ones*

*and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.  
Light is shed upon the righteous  
and joy on the upright in heart.  
Rejoice in the LORD, you who are righteous,  
and praise his holy name.*

Three things I'd draw to your attention. First, God's people hate evil. Part of being under God's rule is that you're for what God's for and you're against what God's against. God's against evil, so you're against evil. This demonstrates your love for God.

Next Sunday, we've got the Rugby League grand final. Suppose you were a member of Parramatta Leagues Club – that is, you say you want to support this Leagues Club. You decide to go to the Club to watch the game. You turn up in a Storm jersey. You've got pom-poms in Storm colours. Every time the Storm scores you cheer and jump up and down and wave your pom-poms. Well, that's not quite true – because the first time you do it, the bouncers break your legs and throw you out of the Club. You can't be a member of the Parramatta Leagues Club and support the opposition.

To be in God's kingdom is to love good and hate evil. We're not there to support the opposition. Do you hate evil? A few centuries ago, the Puritan, Richard Sibbes, came up with several tests to help us check:

- If our hatred of sin is universal – that is, we don't pick and choose between sins we like and ones we don't like; we hate everything God calls sin.
- If our hatred of sin is fixed – that is, there aren't times when we have second thoughts and want to hang onto a particular sin or think it's not all that

bad and so we can indulge it.

- If we hate sin wherever it is found – that is, we must hate it in ourselves equally as much as we hate it in others; we must see the plank in our own eye as truly being a plank and remember it's much greater than the speck in our brother's eye.
- If we can be reproved for sin and not get angry – that is, we welcome the help of others to identify sin in our lives and to aid us get rid of it.<sup>1</sup>

He had some others as well – but that's enough to show me I've still got a long way to go. I fail at each of those points.

Now, this is important.

- Some in our age deny evil altogether.
- Many more deny that humans are evil – they say we're all essentially good, it's just something external that's sidetracked the good in people and led them down the wrong path and all they need is a bit of friendly re-education.
- Many more still deny many of the categories God calls evil, or they want to water them down – for example, they say moderate greed is good; being loose about sex is desirable; and so on.

It affects our thinking. I think people in the church today are generally less concerned about issues of sin and holiness than when I was a child. We accept it more in our own lives. We accept it more in the lives of others. We've dropped our standards. Many would claim we've got a greater understanding of God's grace and a less legalistic attitude. Paul says:

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<sup>1</sup> James M.Boice, *Psalms Vol.2* (Michigan: Baker, 2007) 794.

*For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age ... (Tit.2:11-12)*

This psalm calls us to the same stand.

Secondly, God's people live in God's wisdom. Left to ourselves, we flounder round in the dark. We don't want the real God telling us what to do. We don't want Him defining our evil for us. And so we make up our own gods who let us do what we want to do – who let us rule ourselves.

But those who submit to God's rule have God's word to guide them. Indeed, God's word's available for everyone – but those who refuse to submit to God don't bother to open it or pay attention to it.

- God's word tells us what we're like – rebellious sinners not wanting to pay attention to God and in desperate need of God to rescue us – of needing God to remove our hearts inclined to evil and give us new hearts.
- God's word tells us what God's like and what His purposes in the world are so we can live in a way consistent with those purposes.
- God's word tells us what's truly right and wrong as He defines it. He doesn't leave us to guess or to grope round in the dark. He let's us know how we should best live.

In God's world, we need God's wisdom about life. That's available for those who submit to God. How foolish it is to think we can submit and not pay attention to God's word – not even bother to read it.

And so thirdly, we come back to the opening exhortation again: God's people rejoice in God. Why is God's rule a cause for our rejoicing? Several reasons.

- First, because we already experience God's rule as grace. We receive God's grace through the goodness of His creation – just as everyone does. But more than that, we receive God's grace through the goodness of the gospel – that this sovereign God provides the means to forgive us and welcome us into His family; that though we're evil through and through, He's rescued us and will bring us to complete perfection.
- Secondly, we rejoice in God's rule because we know He uses that rule to achieve His good purposes in our lives. And so we know that He uses all the circumstances of our lives within those purposes. We don't always understand that – but by faith we're confident in what He's doing.
- Thirdly, we rejoice in God's rule because we know He achieves His purposes – and those purposes include the setting right of His universe. He will bring justice. He will establish His kingdom in its full glory. He will remove all evil. That gives us meaning and purpose. It gives us confidence in the future.
- Fourthly, we rejoice in God's rule because it's right. He's wise beyond our imaginations. He's good beyond our imaginations. He's glorious beyond our imaginations. No thing and no person compares with Him – not even close.

God rules. The question this psalm leaves us: Do you willingly and joyfully submit to His rule?