

Ruler of *the nations*

July 1, 2012

Psalm 2; Romans 13:1-7

David A. Renwick

This summer in our sermons we are looking together at God's word as it comes to us from the book of Psalms – a collection of 150 hymns and poems and prayers that we find right in the heart of our Bible that come from the religious life, the spiritual life the worship life of the people and temple of ancient Israel. So far as we've looked at these Psalms we've seen that some of the Psalms are up and some of the Psalms are down.

- Some of the Psalms lead us up to Heaven to think together, to explore together about the glory of God, about the majesty and the honor of God. And God's passion, this creator of the universe to be related to creatures like us, a love that will not let us go, that cannot get us out of His mind. A passion to speak to us in words written in a book, the book of scripture and in words that are not written anywhere but are seen all over the creation that God has made.
- Some of the Psalms are up, but some of the Psalms are down. They are expressions of the Psalmists' disappointment with God. The fact that the "glory of God" that is spoken of doesn't always seem to exist right here on earth. So some of the Psalms are what we call laments (about one third). And some of the Psalms are what we call penitential – they're filled not just with a sense of sadness and disappointment with God, but with our own lives and the fact that we have not lived up to our own expectations. And these psalms bring us before God in sorrow and in grief and in penitence.

So this is what we've looked at so far.

We move on this Sunday to think of a theme that is repeated within the Psalms, in one third of the Psalms, and that is pertinent to our national celebrations this "July the 4th week." As we think together about our nation I want us to do so in the context of God's opinion, expressed in the Psalms, about all the nations and *the peoples of the earth*. The word "nations" and the word "peoples" each appear in the Psalms more than 50 times (see the appendix below for a sample of these occurrences). This is a significant repetition, and indicates that this is a common, widespread theme in the pages of scripture: the relationship of God to *the peoples* and *the nations of the world*. Indeed, the relationship of God and his own chosen people, the ancient people Israel to *the nations* and *the peoples* of this world.

So, this is what I'd like us to think about today: *the relationship of God and his chosen people to all the peoples and nations of the world*. The theme is clearly spoken about in the pages of scripture, but, when it occurs, it frequently does so because it is problematic! These relationships are filled with difficulties and conundrums: aspects of the relationships are just plain hard to understand.

Chosen but Not Feeling Blessed. Sometimes the problem is not much different from the general problem of evil within this world. The question is put like this: *Lord, if we are chosen, if we are your special people how come all the other peoples and nations of **the world** seem to prosper more than we do? What's going on there? We have been obedient but they seem to gain all the benefit.* You can see this question being raised in many of the Psalms. It's there in Psalm 44:8,9,14, for example:

*"God we have boasted continually and we will give thanks to your name forever." [DR: We've been faithful Lord. Yet you have rejected us. There is this overt indictment against God.] "Yet you, Lord, have rejected us and abased us and have not gone out with our armies. You have made us a byword among **the nations**, a laughing stock among **the peoples**."*

Or Psalm 79:

*"O God, **the nations** have come into your inheritance. They have laid Jerusalem in ruins. Why should **the nations** say where is their God?"*

These words are clearly written as a response after the destruction of Jerusalem, 600 years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. And the place has been filled, Jerusalem has been filled with God's enemies; they have overrun the place, and this ought not to be the case if the people of Israel have been chosen by God! How can this possibly happen? Has God blessed them and not us?

There is a sense of humiliation here. There is a sense of pain and above all, there is a sense of confusion. And that confusion is only *exacerbated by the fact of Israel's history – of the stories that come to the people of Israel from the past*, from what God did in the past. And it makes it worse: Lord if this is how you treated us in the past, if you went before us and you provided us victory in the past, why not now? Why not us? Why them and not us? Why then and not now? Psalm 44, verses 1-3, reads:

*We have heard with our ears, O God. Our ancestors have told us what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old. You with your own hand drove out **the nations**, but your people (us!) you planted. You afflicted **the peoples**, but your people you set free. For not by their own sword did they win the land. You are my king and my God, it is you who command victories for Jacob [DR: "Jacob" is just another name for Israel. You are the one who gave victory in the past. What's happened? Why not now?] You drove out nations before them. He apportioned them for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents.*

But this is not what we see now. What is going on? How can this be explained?

Explanation 1: The Consequences of Sin. Some of the Psalms try to explain this *disconnect between being chosen and the lamentable state of Israel* when compared with others. But when it comes to the explanation, the easiest explanation, and some of the Psalms give *this explanation, is that we as God's chosen people have not been faithful. We have been*

disobedient and we reap the consequences. It's a question of cause and effect: obedience leads to prosperity, disobey and things do not go well! Psalm 78 reads:

He drove out nations before his people. Yet they tested the most high God and rebelled against Him. They did not observe His decrees but turned away and were faithless like their ancestors. They twisted like a treacherous bow. When God heard he was full of wrath and he utterly rejected Israel.

In fact, God's rejection is not quite as extreme as that, but it feels that way! [This is a good reminder that the Psalms are often an expression of the feelings of those poets and faithful people in ancient Israel, whether their feelings were right or wrong]. The people weren't 'utterly' rejected, but they certainly didn't see God's blessing and favor. There was a sense that *what they did or did not do* led to these extreme consequences.

And sometimes we know that that's the case with us too: we see our behavior and we know we are reaping the consequences. But what we also know is that that's not always the case.

Explanation 2: There Is No Explanation, Just A Hope For A Future Justice. The real problem with understanding evil is this – that while sometimes cause and effect come into play, there are other times when we know that the punishment simply doesn't fit the crime. It just doesn't seem right. There is injustice in this world and our hearts scream out at the unfairness of it all. And the Psalmists cry out like that repeatedly at the unfairness of it all. And at times in thinking of that unfairness they don't look for an explanation at all: instead, as they cry out to God, they hold on to the belief that God will sort it out in the end – That is, to the psalmists, ***sometimes there's an explanation, sometimes there's no explanation, but, either way, they believed that God would sort it all out in the end.*** As the Apostle Paul says (in 1Corinthian 13) “now we see through a mirror dimly but *then* (in heaven! only in heaven!) we will see face-to-face.” There will be a ‘then’ – a time when judgment and justice will come.

Judgment and Justice, by the way, are two interesting words which appear in the Psalms frequently. More often than not, I tend to think that many of us think of the word ‘judgment’ negatively, as if judgment were linked to the unveiled power of God coming indiscriminately on ***the earth***, in ***the world***, and we tend to think (correctly!) that there's something which doesn't sit right with that, as if there's something potentially unfair about God's judgment. What I would counsel is that when we hear the word ‘judgment’ we immediately choose to hear the related word “justice” at the same time. That is, for the ancients, for the people of Israel, judgment was not just about the wrath of God (though it was: God's unrivalled power would be made known in judgment). But above that, it was about the coming of God's justice: a day coming when all the things which are so wrong with ***the world*** will be put right; all those things that we don't understand will be made clear. And God's perfect plan, which will be seen to be fair and right, will somehow be made known through it all.

This was the understanding of ancient Israel and this was the genius of judgment. It's not clear now but one day, one day it will be clear. So we read in Psalm 9:

*“Let **the nations** be judged before you. Put them in fear, O Lord. Let **the nations** know that they are only human.”*

Or Psalm 96:

*“Say among **the nations** the Lord is King. He will judge **the peoples** with equity. Let the heavens be glad and let **the earth** rejoice but God is coming to judge **the earth**. He will judge **the world** with righteousness and **the peoples** with his truth.”*

Not just some people but all people. A judgment that is equitable, that is righteous (and that word simply means “right” and “fair”) and we will know it. And it will be filled with truth, and we will see it and affirm it joyfully.

In our hearts, isn't it true that we all long for that day when the mysteries of life become clear? The Psalmist believe that in the midst of a world which we can only partly explain and understand there will come a day when God's explanation will be clear. The judgment and the justice of God will come.

In the meantime, God Reigns and is Worthy of Praise. But what about the meantime? What do we do now? Well, sometimes the Psalmists just murmur and they complain. That's what they do. That's what the Psalms of lament are about. But in the midst of those laments they challenge themselves and they challenge us to remember that God is still God. God reigns over the chaos, over the waters, over the disasters, over the power, the seeming power of human beings, God is still king. God still reigns over not just his chosen people but all **the peoples** and all **the nations** of **the world**. Psalm 86 reads:

*All **the nations** you have made shall come and bow down before you oh Lord for you are great and do wondrous things. You alone are God. May all kings fall down before Him.*

Or Psalm 72: *All **nations** give Him service. Clap your hands all **you people**. Shout to God with loud shouts of joy. God is king over **the nations**. God sits on his Holy Throne.*

Even though it doesn't look like it, God sits on his throne. Even though it's the furthest thing from our minds, God sits on the throne and all nations give him service. Even when we have no clue what God is up to, the God of the Psalmists is a God who we are called to praise.

Psalm 117: *Praise the Lord all **you nations**. Extol Him all **you peoples**.*

Psalm 108: *I will give thanks to You O Lord among **the peoples**,*

*I will sing praise to You among **the nations**.*

Psalm 66: *Bless our God, **O peoples**. Let the sound of His praise be heard.*

So this is the picture we find in the book of Psalms about God and **the nations** and **the peoples** of **the earth**. It's a picture of

- God's love for one nation and yet His concern for every nation.
- His longing to be honored by all peoples and His special blessing on some, which does not mean that they are robbed of responsibility and accountability but quite the reverse.

Being chosen, being special in any sense in the pages of scripture, while it is an honor is always also a responsibility. So those who have been blessed have been called to be a blessing and do not escape their responsibility.

- We see here God's love for one nation, his concern for all.
- We see God's passion for justice in every nation, which may seem slow in coming but is on its way.
- And we see God's sovereign power over all peoples that makes our power a pride in our own power to shrink to nothing.

These thoughts can be found in many Psalms and they can be found as well in the Psalm that we read earlier, Psalm 2, though there is something in Psalm 2 that we have not seen yet in the other Psalms that I have just quoted: one significant addition. That is, we have in the collection of Psalms

- not only Psalms of glory that lift us up to Heaven and speak about the majesty of God and the purpose of God.
- We have not only laments and penitential Psalms
- but there are other categories as well
- and one of those other categories is what we call Messianic.

Psalm 2 is a Messianic Psalm that speaks about the coming of the Messiah, the coming of a king. God's king on **the earth**, an anointed one whom God will send one day and whose mission will be not just to one nation but to every nation and to every people to bring for himself into the kingdom of God people from every tongue and tribe and nation whose power is greater than the power of any and every authority.

Listen again to words that come from Psalm 2, beginning at verse 2.

*The kings of **the earth** set themselves and the rulers take council together against the Lord and his anointed*

[DR: The word in Hebrew for anointed is "meshiach," or "messiah". So there they are, all the powerful people in the world, and they are rallied against "the Lord and his Messiah,"] *saying let us burst their bonds asunder and cast their cords from us.*

[DR: they think they are more powerful than the power of God. God responds in Verse 4] *He who sits in the heavens laughs. The Lord holds them in derision. Then He will speak to them in His wrath and terrify them in His fury.*

[DR: Just in a moment, in a twinkling what they will realize is, as we realized when over a million people lost power this week, that the power could go in a flash, to be left with nothing].

*I have set my king on Zion my holy hill, says God. I will tell if the decree of the Lord. He said to me [to the Messiah] you are my son. Today I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will make **the nations** your heritage and the ends of **the earth** your possession. You [the Messiah] shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.*

So here we have in Psalm 2, in addition to these other Psalms, this Messianic prophesy of a king who is going to come, whose power will be visible and who will rule ***the nations***. The expectation of the Messiah when Jesus came (and we as Christians believe He is the Messiah), was that he would come with a sword in his hand and he would cast out all the enemies of God's ancient people and he would do it with a sword; he would conquer with a sword.

But what we know and what we believe as Christians, is that this did not happen in this particular way. At least not in the first coming.

When the book of Revelation reflects on the second coming it depicts Jesus the Messiah in terms of this warrior king; and when we see Jesus in the gospels we catch one or two glimpses of this, when, for example, Jesus overturns the tables of the money changers in the temple. This is the warrior king emerging. But what we know beyond the use of force and power is that Jesus' coming the first time as the Messiah came not to wield the sword, not to prove how powerful he was but to prove how loving he was. He came the first time to demonstrate divine power through sacrificial love.

Our claim as Christians is that Jesus Christ has won for himself a people from every tongue and tribe and ***nation***, not with the power of the sword but with the power of sacrificial love. And the lesson of the Psalm ultimately is this: that while there is a legitimate use of force (and we read of this in Romans 13, which emphasizes that there is a legitimate use of force by a sovereign nation), nevertheless, the use of force when it is not accompanied by sacrificial love will never achieve the ends that we want.

You can force something on somebody else, but will that make them respond to you in the way you want? It doesn't work that way and the Messiah shows us this – that side-by-side with His innate force and power as God, the force and power that He really wants to wield, and that won us onto his side, is not brute force but the force of love, a love that was willing to descend all the way to death, on a cross, where his body was broken and his blood was shed for us.

Thank God Jesus the Messiah came not just for one nation but for you and me, for peoples from every tribe and tongue and nation, and won us back to God by his body broken and his blood shed – by love.

So these are thoughts which take us through the book of Psalms. There are many different ideas in this amazing array of Psalms, which use the words ***nations and peoples*** over 50 times each, indicating them as a passionate concern of the psalmists and of God.

What then do we take away with us as we think about this? Well nothing I think is better than taking away some prayers that we can pray especially in this week as we think about our nation. Our prayers should be . . .

- Prayers of enormous gratitude. For while ***the nations of the earth*** lack justice and while we may well say that we don't have justice as it ought to be (we surely all say that), yet we have

more justice in our nation than almost any other of *the nations of the earth*. And for this we should be profoundly grateful every day of our lives and grateful to God.

- But if we'd been blessed in this way what the Psalmists tell us is that we are more accountable to be sharers of the blessing with others than we ever were before. So may God bless us so that we can become a blessing to *the nations of the earth*.
- What else to pray for? The courage the Psalmists had to tell their people to be humble, to remember no matter what great power we wield as individuals or as a nation our power is tiny compared to the power of God. It is God who reigns and if we ever mistake our power for reigning as God reigns we are in trouble. It is God who reigns. We are one nation under God. And while God may seem to be asleep is far from being asleep. His plans and purposes will be fulfilled in his time. He will come again to judge the living and the dead and to bring to pass that equity and that righteousness and that truth for which we all crave.
- One final prayer. We should pray that we understand the nature of power within our lives and within our nation. There is a time for the use of force. But the power that Jesus used as the Messiah to win for himself a people, you and me, from every tongue and tribe and nation was not brute force. It was sacrificial love. And the world awaits a people who will demonstrate that power, the power within the love that changed the world, and your life and mine.
- May God bless us that we would be a blessing.

Let us pray. Holy God we bow before you. Give to us a sense of your grandeur. Give to us a sense of your passion for all peoples and for our lives as individuals as well as our life together as a nation. So bless us that we would bear our responsibility to be a blessing. Amen.

Appendix – Psalms on the subject of 'Peoples and Nations'

GOD=S LACK OF SUPPORT OF HIS PEOPLE

Psalm 44

8. In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever. 9. Yet you have rejected us and abased us, and have not gone out with our armies. 14. You have made us a byword among *the nations*, a laughing stock among *the peoples*.

Psalm 79

1. O God, *the nations* have come into your inheritance; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. 10. Why should *the nations* say, "Where is their God?"

GOD=S PAST SUPPORT OF HIS PEOPLE

Psalm 44

We have heard with our ears, O God, our ancestors have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old: 2. you with your own hand drove out *the nations*, but your people you planted; you afflicted *the peoples*, but your people you set free; 3. for not by their own sword did they win the land, 4. You are my King and my God; you command victories for Jacob.

Psalm 80

8. You brought a vine out of Egypt . . . 12. Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?

SOMETIMES GOD=S PEOPLE=S OWN

FAULT

Psalm 78

55. He drove out **nations** before them; he apportioned them for a possession and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents. . . . 56. Yet they tested the Most High God, and rebelled against him. They did not observe his decrees, 57. but turned away and were faithless like their ancestors; they twisted like a treacherous bow. 59. When God heard, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel.

GOD WILL SORT THINGS OUT IN THE

END

Psalm 9

15. *The nations* have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught. 19. Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail; let *the nations* be judged before you. 20. Put them in fear, O LORD; let *the nations* know that they are only human.

Psalm 96

9. Worship the LORD in holy splendor; tremble before him, all *the earth*. 10. Say among *the nations*, "The LORD is king! He will judge *the peoples* with equity." 11. Let the heavens be glad, and let *the earth* rejoice; for God is coming to judge *the earth*. He will judge *the world* with righteousness, and *the peoples* with his truth.

IN THE MEANTIME, GOD ALONE REIGNS

Psalm 86

9. All *the nations* you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord, 10. For you are great and do wondrous things; you alone are God.

Psalm 72

11. May all kings fall down before him, all NATIONS give him service.

Psalm 47

1. Clap your hands, all *you peoples*; shout to God with loud songs of joy. 8. God is king over *the nations*; God sits on his holy throne.

Psalm 99 1.

The LORD is king; let *the peoples* tremble! 2. The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all *the peoples*.

Psalm 113 4.

The LORD is high above all NATIONS, and his glory above the heavens.

IN THE MEANTIME, PRAISE GOD ANYWAY IN EVERY NATION

Psalm 117

Praise the LORD, all *you nations*! Extol him, all *you peoples*!

Psalm 108

3. I will give thanks to you, O LORD, among *the peoples*, and I will sing praises to you among *the nations*. 4. For your steadfast love is higher than the heavens, and your faithfulness reaches to the clouds.

Psalm 66

8. Bless our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard,

Psalm 105

O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, make known his deeds among *the peoples*. 2. Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. 3. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice.