

## Psalm 97. Let the earth be glad

### Context

This hymn calls on God's people, and indeed the whole world, to worship the true God, rather than idols. The true God is King, Judge and Saviour. He will destroy his enemies and rescue his people. This God is righteous and just.

### Comment

#### **97:1–6. The Lord reigns**

The psalmist announces that God *reigns* as King (Pss 93:1; 96:10; 99:1; Rev. 19:6). He invites all the inhabitants of the earth to join him in joyful worship. He then describes God's awesome appearance in language that suggests a storm. He comes accompanied by *clouds*, *thick darkness* and *lightning*. Similar language is found in Psalm 18 (vv. 9–15), although there it is clear that God rides the clouds like a chariot. Perhaps the same depiction is intended here. *Fire* precedes him and consumes his enemies. Both cloud and fire remind one of the wilderness period when Israel was led by cloud during the day and fire at night. Both represented God's presence. A cloud serves well to represent God's presence and also his glory, because although it is visible, a cloud obscures one's vision. People cannot see in it or through it; thus the cloud provides a sense of mystery and indirectness in the experience of God's presence. His presence is in the cloud (Exod. 13:21), protecting people from a lethal dose of God's glory. The Pentateuch preserves stories of God's righteous judgment in which the fire that proceeds from him destroys his enemies. When Aaron's two sons, Nadab and Abihu, offered 'strange' fire in their incense burners, fire came out from the Lord and consumed them (Lev. 10). God's appearance is so powerful that the mountains, the geographical symbol of stability, melt like wax (Mic. 1:4; see also Nah. 1:5). This awesome God serves the interest of righteousness and justice, which are metaphorically pictured as *the foundation of his throne* (v. 2; see also Ps. 89:14). According to Proverbs 16:12, referring to human kings, 'Kings detest wrongdoing, for a throne is established through righteousness.'

#### **97:7. Worship him**

God is glorious and awesome (vv. 1–6), and for that reason the psalmist says that idol

worshippers will be shamed. Idols are, after all, nothing like the true God, and those who worship them are foolish ([Isa. 44](#)). Interestingly, using a wordplay on idols (*'ēlîlîm*) and gods (*'ēlōhîm*), the psalmist calls on the *gods* themselves to worship the true God. The gods represented by the idols do not deserve praise; they should worship the true God. In this conception, the gods are real (see also [Pss 82; 95:3](#)), but they are spiritual beings (angels and demons) created by the true God.

### **97:8–12. You are exalted**

The gods should worship God (v. 7), because he is *exalted far above all gods* (v. 9). Those who worship the true God (*Zion/the villages of Judah*) are glad that their God brings judgment, because his judgments against their enemies save them (v. 10) and bring joy to the righteous. Thus, the psalmist calls on them to join in worshipping the Lord.

#### *Meaning*

This psalm (like [96](#) and [98](#)) combines a focus on God as Saviour, King and Judge. It pictures God as fearsome and righteous, whose judgments benefit his people, but destroy his enemies. Thus his people should worship him.

God has been King from ages past ([Ps. 93:2](#)), and he is King today, but the whole world will finally recognize his sovereign rule when Christ returns as King, Judge and Saviour. According to John,

I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting:

‘Hallelujah!

For our Lord God Almighty reigns.

Let us rejoice and be glad

and give him glory!’

([Rev. 19:6–7](#))