

Valparaiso University

ValpoScholar

Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms

University Archives & Special Collections

5-4-1997

Psalm 98: A Psalm

Walter E. Keller

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/kellerpsalms>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives & Special Collections at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walter E. Keller's Devotional Studies of Psalms by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.

Psalm 98

A Psalm.

(RSV)

Vv. 1-3

- ¹ O sing to the LORD a new song,
for he has done *marvelous things!*
His right hand and his holy arm
have gotten him *victory*.**
- ² The LORD has made known his *victory*,
he has revealed his *vindication* in the sight of the nations.**
- ³ He has remembered his *steadfast love and faithfulness*
to the house of Israel.
All the ends of the earth have seen
the *victory* of our God.**

These verses are a call to praise the LORD, the God of Israel. Why? Because He has gained the victory, He has done so for all to see, and He has done so in faithfulness to His People. God's victory over Israel's enemies is seen as a saving work by which He revealed His redemptive righteousness (compare Romans 3:21-26).

The key term in these verses is "victory." It is a synonym for "marvelous things," a term frequently used in the Psalms for God's activity on behalf of His People (e.g. Psalm 9:1; Psalm 96:3). Victory in verse 2 is parallel to "vindication," which may also be translated as "saving righteousness" (REB), or as "triumph" (NAB). And in verse 3 it is associated with "steadfast love and faithfulness," which is the LORD's promised fidelity to the covenant He has made with Israel. What holds all this together is that God chose the Israelites to be His own peculiar People and formed them into His royal priesthood and holy nation at Sinai (Exodus 19:1-6) in fulfillment of His promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6; 17:1-7; compare Exodus 3:6-8). The fundamental covenant formula is, "You shall be My People, and I will be your God." Thus the fortunes of Israel became a kind of barometer of both the reliability and the power of the LORD. If Israel suffered at the hands of other nations, Israel's LORD seemed either fickle or impotent.

It is impossible to locate historically the victory in which this Psalm exults. But typical elements of Israel's faith are all in place. Whatever or whenever the victory, it was a marvelous, powerful deed of the LORD; it was a victory of the LORD over Israel's and the LORD's enemies. It was seen by Israel as evidence of the LORD's faithfulness to His promises to them. And since it was a victory on the field of battle, it was publicly accessible knowledge that the LORD had saved His People. In this way a victory constituted a vindication both of the LORD and of faith in that LORD.

Vv. 4-6

- ⁴ Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;
break forth into joyous song and sing praises!**
- ⁵ Sing praises to the LORD with the lyre,
with the lyre and the sound of melody!**
- ⁶ With trumpets and the sound of the horn
make a joyful noise before the King, the LORD!**

These verses are an address to all the earth to join in the song of praise, with all available instrumentation, to the Lord, the universal King.

What is so remarkable about these verses is that, although the LORD's victory over His enemies is praised as a vindication of the LORD, there is nothing vindictive about this Psalm, nor is there here any taunt in the face of the defeated nation. All the earth is invited to join in praise to this victorious LORD and acknowledge Him as the King of all the earth. If, therefore we think for a moment of the LORD's mighty victory over the Egyptians when He delivered His People from their bondage in the Exodus, and if I imagine myself to have been an Egyptian at the time, this Psalm is inviting me to join in Israel's praise of the victorious God of Israel. It is a genuine invitation. Of course, if I were going to accept that invitation, I would have to repent; that is, I would have to acknowledge my god to have been inferior. More, I would have become exposed to the further crisis that it was a non-god to whom I had accorded the rank of God, and that therefore I had been worshipping an idol. I would have to repent; that is, I would have to acknowledge that the God of Israel was indeed the true God, who saved His People and who was now inviting me to join the ranks of those who had been thus saved. I could then be brought to acknowledge that that was the good and gracious will of the LORD God all along, ever since the beginning. That would be a most difficult repentance, an almost impossible conversion. It would require an extraordinary love and patience on the part of the LORD's People to draw me into such a conversion; indeed, it would have to be the attractive power of the good Spirit that animated that holy nation.

Vv. 7-9

- ⁷ Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
the world and those who dwell in it!**
**⁸ Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing for joy together**
**⁹ before the LORD, for he comes
to judge the earth.**
**He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with equity** (a synonym for righteousness).

These verses appeal even to inanimate nature to praise the LORD, because He will come as the righteous Judge of all the earth.

The LORD who saved Israel in the past is the same one who will come again in the future. And when He comes again in the future, it will be to judge the whole earth and all the peoples. The very remarkable thing about that return is that the Psalmist calls upon the whole world to rejoice now in that prospect. The joy in the anticipation of the LORD's coming is of a piece with the joy in His coming in times past. That is because the righteousness (translated "vindication" in verse 2) of the past is the same as the righteousness of verse 9. The standard of the LORD's judgment in the future is the same as it was in the past. And just as that righteousness/vindication of the past is the basis for the appeal to praise, so that same righteousness is the basis for the appeal to rejoice in the future. The righteousness and equity by which he judges is that he will be faithful to His promises, vindicating his promises to His People by saving them, and overthrowing all those who resist Him and His People, and extending the invitation to all the earth to rejoice in that righteousness.

When Christians now pray this Psalm, they will need to make the necessary modifications required by the fulfillment of the New Testament. Thus, the LORD Yahweh is now further revealed as the Triune God: the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, born of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and who since his resurrection works among us by His Spirit. The People of God are embodied in Jesus Christ, so that all of us who are "in Christ" (baptized Christians) are among the New Israel, the People of God, the Body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit. The enemy over whom God now triumphs is more closely identified by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead: death, of course, and that is the principal emphasis on the prayer below. But God will triumph also over all those people who continue to oppose him by continuing to place their trust in, and to cling so loyally to, something other than and less than Christ, the Savior born in Bethlehem. And God will triumph over all that opposition or indifference, which, *despite our warm, patient, and winsome efforts to the contrary*, refuses to join with us in our praise of the LORD, the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus.

The Prayer from the LBW for Psalm 98:

Lord, we sing to you a new song, for your victory is ever new. In the empty tomb you have given us a glimpse of your future, and in your victory over death you have shown us how we shall overcome the last enemy. As the seas roar and the hills sing together, we too will praise you for your great triumph, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.

The imperative to sing unto the LORD a new song is the inspiration for hymn writers to compose new texts and tunes in praise of God. Dr. Philip Gehring (as professor of music at Valparaiso University) once told me that the latter half of the 20th century has been unparalleled in the history of the Church for the composition of hymn texts and tunes.

Isaac Watts wrote the Christmas hymn, "Joy to the World," on the basis of this Psalm. This Psalm is appointed also for Christmas Day because the coming of the LORD of which this Psalm speaks in verse 9 finds its initial fulfillment in the birth of the Savior.

Nugget

What starts with a burst of enthusiasm begins to wear thin because people cannot come up with an endless supply of new ideas and because ritual by nature is repetitive. Innovators who get rid of one tradition usually settle into their own, which often fails to stand the test of time. The new songs that were so appealing upon their introduction grow tiresome for lack of musical substance. They may not hold the same meaning for the new members as they did for the founders. The absence of prayers, words, and music inherited from ancient tradition gives the service a flimsy feeling, as if faith and worship were simply one more passing fashion among the myriad fads that come and go.

Doran and Troger, *Trouble at the Table*, as quoted on *Context* -- December 15, 1999

Walter E. Keller

May 4, 1997 – **Easter 6**

December 25, 1999 – **Christmas Day**