

Psalm 97
Br. David Doran

Verse 1: “THE LORD REIGNETH!”—just these three words begin the chapter yet in them is summed up THE message of the ages! It is the proclamation of the beginning of the age which will terminate in the perfection of all things! It is the answer to the age-old prayer of saints: “Thy kingdom come.” (See Scripture Studies, Vol. III, pg. 301.)

It is wise to ask Who is meant by the word LORD. Is it Jehovah’s reign, or Jesus’ reign? It is both, and this is amply borne out by Scripture testimony. Jesus’ reign the forepart of Jehovah’s reign which extends into the ages of eternity. The first age of this eternity is expressly reserved for administration by Christ Jesus and His Church. Therefore the reign is of the Father, yet by the Son.

Two texts which demonstrate this are Rev. 11:15 and Psalm 2:2. In each the ruling power is stated to be “The Lord and His anointed [Christ];” i.e., God and The Christ. The context of Psalm 2 continues to bolster this conclusion. In verses 4 through 9, we are instructed that Jehovah has “anointed” (margin, vs. 6) His Son as judge and king.

The remainder of verse 1 of Psalm 97 sums up what should be earth’s reaction to the news of the reign, if earth could only understand! The Psalmist tells us, however, that the earth won’t rejoice; it will tremble (verse 4). Those who do understand (those begotten of God) do rejoice. Thus it is written in verse 8 that “Zion heard, and was glad.” For a more detailed explanation of why the earth should rejoice, David wrote Psalm 98:4-9. But in Psalm 97:1, he merely reminds us of the impending joy before he relates the misery which must first come upon the world.

While the world will not yet hear, it is, nevertheless, our great privilege to tell them the good news of the Lord’s reign. There is now a new generation; indeed, it is half of our population! And they have never yet heard the truth! They are a generation of seekers and questioners; they are a generation which have rejected traditional theology; they are a generation ripe for the message of the Kingdom. It seems inconceivable that the Church will vanish from this earth silently. And now the Lord has provided a huge receptive audience for our final witness! Let us proclaim: “The Lord reigneth; let the earth rejoice!”

Verse 2: Suddenly the picture changes from joy to gloom! David now characterizes the effects of the beginning of the reign lest anyone err in picturing the Millennium as all sunshine. “DARKNESS IS ROUND ABOUT HIM.”—Darkness is a symbol. It stands for lack of understanding. David shows the world doesn’t understand the Lord or His purposes. Thus they cannot rejoice, as verse 1 admonished.

How long will this darkness remain? The Scriptures explicitly declare that this darkness must remain until the miraculous deliverance of Israel. Isa. 60:1-3 explains that the light dispelling the darkness will be manifested ONLY through the nation of Israel. Then will “ten men take hold out of all languages of the nations, even shall take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew, saying, We will go with you: for we have heard that God is with you.” (Zech. 8:23)

Darkness is lack of understanding of the situation. What is the situation in the world today? The situation of mankind is this: TWO SIDES. Mankind has divided himself into two camps. Man knows this; but he doesn't understand it. He is in darkness regarding its cause and cure. On one side we have restless men (generally, but not always, young). On this side are men of vision who are discontented with the world they see; also, there are men of despair. Their common aim is change, hoping that whatever comes will be better. On the opposite side we have men who want to preserve the present order. Often they are men of means or power. But also on this side are men of fear. While they have little to protect in the way of belongings, they fear any change lest it result in trouble. The Darkness that overcomes them all is the lack of knowledge that God is using them against each other to remove the old order for the full establishment of His Kingdom.

But we, Brethren, are not in that darkness. The Lord has enlightened our eyes through His Word. Consider Psalm 93. The opening verse places us at the same historical moment as Psalm 97—“The Lord reigneth.” But another element enters the picture: “The world also is stablished that it cannot be moved.” This is the setting for a battle! The Lord who reigns versus the world that refuses to let Him reign! The 3rd verse acknowledges that the world is not all of one mind however! There is a “flood” class—the sea of restless humanity. And in the 4th verse we are assured that the Lord is able to control that class to do His bidding. But the Psalm never gives us the result of the battle! It simply closes by stating that the Lord's testimonies are sure. What are the Lord's testimonies concerning how He will use the sea class to conquer the world? We must look elsewhere to find out.

One of the testimonies is found in Mark 11. In verses 13 and 14 and 20 and 21 is related the incident of our Lord's cursing of the fig tree which pictured the Jewish nation. When Peter questioned the matter, our Lord gave him a strange answer indeed! He said (vs. 22), “Have the faith of God.” Then he gives a parable which on the surface seems to have little relationship to the fig tree incident. The Lord states that if we say to a mountain that it should be cast into the sea, we would have that wish fulfilled. What did our Lord mean?

He said “THIS mountain”—(We can almost picture him with a sweeping motion of his hand pointing to all of his surroundings.) Mountain is symbolic of Kingdom, and the

Lord was pointing to Satan's kingdom, the present order of things. And, indeed, the Church class has been asking for the removal of Satan's kingdom for centuries, for when we pray "Thy Mountain [Kingdom] Come" we are indeed praying for the removal of the present mountain. It is because of the great faith of the true Church in making its calling and election sure that this will be possible. It is for this reason that the Lord began with the statement regarding faith. The Lord's faith made possible the dissolution of the Jewish order (fig tree); The Church's faith ("the bride hath made herself ready") makes possible the dissolution of the larger order—Satan's mountain.

But the Lord went further. He added a prophecy of how Satan's kingdom would be destroyed. He said it would be destroyed by restless humanity—"cast into the sea." No doubt the Lord had in mind the marvelous description of David in Psalm 46. This Psalm tells us why Zion was glad when she heard! (Psalm 97:8) Psalm 46:1 assures us of our protection in this day while the mountains are being cast into the sea. Verse 4 shows what makes Zion glad. It is the streams of a river. This is a marvelous statement! It demonstrates the overlapping of destruction and restitution. The river is the river of the waters of life of Rev. 22:1. A stream is a small tributary of a river. Therefore, the Psalmist is stating that the small beginnings of restitution are making Zion glad. These small beginnings are strengthening our faith while the present order crumbles!

So we see the importance of DARKNESS to the beginnings of God's reign. It is a tool in the destruction of Satan's empire; it is a witness to the Church in that we are not plagued by the darkness for we dwell in the light.

Psalm 97:2 also mentions CLOUDS. Clouds, of course, cause darkness and are therefore a good symbol of obscurity and confusion resulting from lack of light (understanding). Confusion is trouble and causes trouble. Hence clouds are always associated with trouble.

We are on the verge of the New Covenant arrangement. Our understanding of it can be enhanced by considering the old (Law) covenant as it was on the verge of ratification. We will see that clouds existed at that event also. It is recorded in Exodus 19 and is full of beautiful typical and symbolical significance.

Verses 10 and 11 set the stage. Antotypically we can see that our Lord has been sanctifying a people (His Church) for two days of a thousand years each. (His first advent was in man's fifth Millennium; and the Gospel Age continued through the sixth Millennium.) It is promised that on the 3rd day (hence man's 7th Millennium) the Lord would make the covenant. In verses 16-18 we find the fulfillment of that promise. And the events describe our day (the making of a new covenant) perfectly. Note the appropriate symbols as they correspond to the Psalm:

—morning of 3rd day = beginning of reign

- thick cloud = time of trouble
- trumpet = the last; the Jubilee trump
- people in camp (world) trembled = Psalm 97:4; etc.

The scriptures tell other things about clouds too! Clouds bring blessings! (This is why Zion is glad!) Proverbs 16:15 states that God's favor "is as a cloud of the latter rain." Rotherham reads, "harvest rain." So it is abundantly clear that the same clouds which the world sees as only trouble bring blessings to Zion! We have received abundantly of the refreshing of harvest rains of truth.

Back to Psalm 97:2. RIGHTEOUSNESS and JUDGMENT are mentioned next. The words are strong reminders of Isa. 28:17, "Judgment also will I lay to the line, and righteousness to the plummet." It is imperative, Brethren, to remember that this text is being fulfilled before our eyes this day. While it is not yet applicable to individuals, it is being applied to governments and institutions. The nations could not be destroyed unless they have been judged! To think otherwise would make a mockery of God's justice. In the words of Dan. 5:27, "Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting." The important lesson in Psalm 97:2 is that righteousness and judgment are the means by which the Lord establishes His throne. "Righteousness and judgement are the establishment [margin] of His throne." In other words, peace is not a sign of the establishment of the Kingdom! No one would recognize a throne set up in peace. Instead, the throne is established by judgments. "In righteousness he doth judge and make war." (Rev. 19:11) Thus we see the scriptural link between the judgment day and the establishing of the kingdom reign by trouble.

Verse 3: David here shows that the enemies of the kingdom (corrupt systems, organizations, etc.) are not merely restrained, but destroyed. Fire here as elsewhere, symbolizes destruction. The thought should be stressed, however, that this is not destruction for the sake of destruction; it is, rather, destruction for the cause of justice, that is RIGHTEOUS destruction. God never destroys for the thrill of destroying. That is a barbaric and dark age philosophy. God destroys because the institution under destruction has no right to exist; it is corrupt and under a RIGHTEOUS sentence of destruction. Knowing this, we can say yea and amen to Paul's words: "Our God is a consuming fire." Heb. 12:29

Verse 4: The LIGHTNINGS mentioned here are also predicted in Daniel 12:4 where the prophet told that "knowledge shall be increased." We have studied darkness and found it to be lack of understanding. Light is the opposite; it is knowledge. Much light results in understanding. But the lightnings here mentioned are too brief in duration to permit understanding. Instead, they promote fear. Lightning is extreme brightness in the midst of gross darkness and storminess. We all know the result, it blinds and it causes

confusion. The cries of liberty, equal rights, etc., are all flashes of truth disturbing the surrounding darkness. And it has all the world in a turmoil!

A beautiful prophecy about this lightning is written in Zech. 10:1, “Ask ye of the Lord rain in the time of the harvest rain; the Lord shall make lightnings [margin], and give them showers of rain to every one grass in the field.” Here we are informed of two effects of rain. As we earlier considered in Proverbs 16:15, the Church is refreshed by the harvest rain. Yet here, all the grass in the field have showers of rain. From Isa. 40:6 we learn that this grass is all mankind. So, Zechariah is acknowledging that all mankind are receiving some benefit or refreshing now—at the same time as the “bright clouds” or lightnings. It is a testimony that restitution blessings are present—even if they are being misused. And note that the Lord sends these blessings by lightnings—the increase of knowledge. All this rain (which is symbolic of refreshing) is in perfect accord with Peter’s statement (Acts 3:19) when he refers to the present as “times of refreshing [rain].” It is little wonder that Zion is glad when she realizes all this!

But we notice back in Psalm 97:4 that the general effect of the lightnings upon the world is trembling: “The earth saw and trembled.” It is, however, no surprise; this result was amply prophesied. Recall Exodus 19:16, “All in the camp [world] trembled.” And our Lord’s words in Luke 21:26, “Men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming on the earth...”

Verse 5: The word “hills” is a Hebrew word which is properly and elsewhere translated mountains. It retains the same symbolic meaning of “kingdoms.” David declares that the kingdoms melted. He had previously said the same in Psalm 46:6 where he states the reason for their melting as being the fact that the Lord “uttered His voice.” This is an important truth. The Lord’s master weapon is Truth. With various truths he is upsetting all error and thereby destroying the systems which promote that error. In Psalm 97:5, however, David expands the thought and says that they “melted like wax.” How does wax melt? It becomes pliable first; it bends and yields. It is in this manner that earth’s governments are losing their power, their form. As society heats up, the governments yield (melt) to meet the demands of the people. In harmony with this we have seen the rise of socialism, reform legislation, etc., all since the Lord’s second advent.

But the Psalmist says more. They melt “at the presence of the LORD.” What a blessed word is this word “presence.” It refers to God’s face which symbolically represents His favor. The word “presence” is first found in Gen. 3:8 when man fell from Divine presence or favor. Chronologically that was the beginning of the 6,000 years of sin and death. But Peter used the Greek equivalent of the word in Acts 3:19, “times of refreshing shall come from the PRESENCE [face, favor] of the Lord.” Peter was referring to the 7th thousand-year day. It is to this same event that Psalm 97:5 refers. Indeed, what David is saying is that the melting mountains are a sign of God’s favor!

Now we find a repetition. Repetitions of words or phrases of scripture are important. Why does David repeat the thought thus: “at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth”? He is stressing a point. The Lord’s face (favor or “presence”) has been toward the Church ever since Pentecost. But now something new has happened. For the first time since Gen. 3:8, God’s face (favor or “presence”) is turned toward all mankind. Now he is “Lord of the whole earth.” This is what Peter was saying in Acts 3. Peter added that this return of face or favor would be demonstrated by an act; that act would be the sending of Jesus Christ at his second advent. Therefore the first thing lost was the first restored: The Favor (Face or Presence) of God. That was the beginning of restitution!

Verses 6 through 10: These verses at first seem rather disconnected and unrelated. Without the aid of Bro. Russell’s foresight relating to the harvest experiences of the Church, these verses would be impossible to interpret. And perhaps without an incident related by Daniel they would have to remain obscure. But with these helps they are one of the delights of harvest period prophecy.

The verses we have just considered detail the Lord’s work in the establishing of His power through the destruction of Satan’s empire. Verses 6 through 10 seem to represent the final stand of earth’s rulers and the ultimate deliverance of the Church. Perhaps the best way to understand these five verses is to paraphrase them before linking them to another typical event. We freely paraphrase thus: (V. 6) In the midst of earth’s turmoil the true Church is declaring that God is righteous in permitting the present confusion. The fact that the Church will continue to do this will result ultimately in the people’s understanding of the Lord’s power and purpose. (V. 7) Mankind’s rulers will yet persist in pride and will force all men to conform to the dictates of church and state as they strive to retain their idol, the old order, the status quo. But to the true Church, the only way is to worship Him and not the images of man’s folly. (V. 8) Zion knew that a dark night was coming in which she would be threatened to cease her work. So, she was glad because she knew she was on the threshold of the peaceable kingdom and that those who threatened her were under the judgments of God. (V. 9) Zion knew that in this final experience God would be exalted above all other powers. (V. 10) Therefore Zion persisted in her work, hating the evil order which commanded her to stop. And when that evil order thought it would destroy Zion, it only hastened her miraculous deliverance. Thus was the Lord glorified.

Compare this, brethren, with the account of the golden image on the plain of Dura found in Daniel 3. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had all been examples among the Babylonians of the grace of God. Then the king set up an image (compare Rev. 13:1, 5-17; Rev. 16:13, 14) and commanded that all conform to a service set for its worship. The three Hebrews refused and were sentenced to destruction in a fiery furnace. They were

miraculously delivered after which the king exalted God above all others: “There is no other God that can deliver after this sort.” Dan. 3:29

It seems probable, then, that Psalm 97 includes all the pertinent details of the closing days of the old order and of the final experiences of the Church in the flesh. In its closing verses (11 and 12) the Psalmist shows the character of the order to come: Light in place of darkness; gladness in place of trembling; and rejoicing for all. But we are Zion! And this is our present joy, ahead of the world of mankind! Yea! We have heard! And we rejoice because of Thy judgments, O Lord!