

I. Intro

A. Years ago, I heard a radio interview with a mystery writer whose goal was to write a novel in which the reader couldn't figure out who "did it" until the very last word of the book. He had been unsuccessful to date. And maybe I just lack imagination, but I can't figure out how he could do it. However, I liked the idea – and understand the value of a late surprise. If you do as well, you are going to like Psalm 98. Well, maybe. Actually, probably not. It's not a mystery. It's a Psalm of rejoicing. And the late surprise, is not generally understood as a pleasant one.

II. This is the last message in this series.

A. Next week is *Serve Your City*, and the week after that we have best-selling author Lee Strobel in to talk about miracles. That is followed by a three-week series looking at what we can learn from Jesus about how to deal with trials and temptations. But today we are still in *Honest Reflections*. And if this Psalm series has worked, you are using the Psalms as prayers – or singing them as songs – more than before. After all, that is what they are there for. God has given us words to say back to him in prayer and worship. Doing so mostly because we are formed in good ways in the process.

III. Today we turn to Psalm 98.

A. It is the fifth of six Enthronement Psalms¹ – that is, Psalms that celebrate the reign of God as king over everything (over people, over nature, over the cosmos, over everything). One of the things these six Psalms all have in common is that they call on us to make noise – to sing and shout because of how amazing and good God is. This particular Psalm goes all in on this, not only calling for us to sing and to use instruments, but also to recruit the sea and everything in it, and the hills and everything on them, to roar. The goal is thunderous applause for God.

B. It's worth noting that Psalm 98 is the Psalm that inspired the Christmas song, *Joy to the World* – which was not written as a Christmas hymn. Isaac Watts wrote it to capture the Psalm 98's call for us to rejoice.

C. Along those same lines, it's worth noting that Psalm 98 appears to be the Psalm that inspired Mary to write the Magnificat. As you may remember, in Luke 1 we are treated to this amazing song she writes after the angel Gabriel tells her that she has found favor with God and is going to give birth to the Son of God. **“My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.”**

D. Psalm 98 is a significant Psalm – and as I noted, it is a surprising Psalm. It takes an unexpected turn in the end. What is this turn? Well, it's a Psalm of rejoicing, and it builds over nine verses with more and more energy given telling us to rejoice, and then... at the end... right at its zenith, we are told why we should be rejoicing: **“because God is coming to judge you.”**

E. What? Wait? Stop. How is that good news? Most people do not think of God's arrival as judge to be something to celebrate.

F. And if they ever did, they do not think that today. Today, where the only passage a pastor can be certain people have heard is, “**judge not.**” It used to be that if people only knew one passage, it was John 3:16. Now they know Matthew 7:1.

1. They actually do not really know it. They may know Jesus said it, but they do not know that it’s from Matthew’s Gospel. And they do not know that it was part of the Sermon on the Mount.

2. They seldom realize the circular reasoning they employ when citing it. Think about it, they believe that judging is a barbaric, medieval undemocratic exercise in intolerance. And they will not stand for it. So, they say “judge not.” But even as they cite it, they are violating what they are advocating.

3. This is one of the most misunderstood passages in the Bible. It’s not a statement against making assessments, even moral assessments. We need to make assessments to live, and other passages tell us to make assessments.² Teachers need to correct students, employers need to judge applicants, parents need to assess babysitters. Matthew 7:1 is not a call to not judge, it’s a warning against hypocrisy and double standards – of judging people by a higher standard that we expect to be judged by.

4. Jesus was telling people not to engage in the kind of judging the Pharisees were engaged in, because if you judge people that way, that is the standard that will be used with you.

G. But let’s set that aside. The point is, most people do not like the idea of judgement and they certainly do not like the idea that one day they will stand before God, accountable for everything they have said, thought and done. It follows that the last line of Psalm 98 is not information that makes them want to rejoice. However, it can be good news. Great news. But that is only true if you understand and embrace the Gospel.

IV. Before we walk through this Psalm, let me note that it is hardly alone in talking about a coming judgment. This is a big idea in the Bible.

A. It comes up all the time:

1. In Matthew 25, Jesus claims to be the Son of Man who will return as judge to decide the eternal destiny of people.

2. In Acts 17:30, we are told to repent because: **God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man (Jesus) he has appointed.**”

3. In Hebrews 9:27 we are told that **it is appointed unto man once to die and after that judgment.**”

4. In I Corinthians 3 we are told that our actions will be judged by fire and that much of what we think is good works will turn out to be “**wood, hay and stubble** that is burned up.

5. In 2 Cor. 5:9 we are told that **all must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.**

6. In Revelation 20 we read more about the the Great White Throne judgement of God’s people.

B. I could go on.³ There are lots of passages like these. Even a casual reading of the Bible makes it clear that after we die we face an audit and that our eternal destiny is shaped by how we have lived. That some will enter into the presence of God for ever and others will not; that there are degrees of both reward and punishment; and that we are all going to be judged – at least in part – by our works.

C. Wait, wait, wait. Some of you are thinking: What do you mean we are judged by our works? I thought we are saved on the basis of Christ's works? Doesn't Titus 3:5 say: God saved us not on the basis of our works, but he saved us according to his mercy through the washing or regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit. Doesn't Ephesians 2:8 say that we are saved by grace through faith and not by works?

D. Hang in there. I will explain. Right now, the point I am trying to make is that we will face a judgment.

1. Even the most casual overview of the Bible makes it clear that: history is linear; it is headed towards a final day; that on the last day we will face an audit; and that Jesus will be our judge.

2. This is what the Bible teaches. And the early church leaders so it as important enough, that it made it into the creeds – these summary statements of the most important parts of the Bible. For instance, in the Apostles' Creed we read: He shall come to judge the living and the dead

E. I think judgment is more complicated than some understand. And I think there is a bit of confusion out there.

1. It is important to note that some of what we think might be God judging us is just us facing the normal consequences of sin.

2. It is important to note that some suggest that judgement is only for non-Christians, that is not what the New Testament teaches.⁴

3. It's important to realize that it is actually impossible to have a God of love who does not judge. Some think the two cannot go together. That the God of the Old Testament and God of the New Testament are different gods. Or that God is bi-polar. No. If God doesn't stop evil, how can he be loving?⁵ The love and wrath of God are actually interdependent. As Adam Smith noted, "mercy to the guilty is cruelty to the innocent." It's the judgement of God that leads to a perfectly just world.

- a) "When we do away with the idea of God as judge we are left with a one-dimensional God – a sappy, sanitized deity who we can easily manage.... The God who is truly scary is not the wrathful God of the Bible, but the god who closes his eyes to the evil of this world, shrugs his shoulders, and ignores it in the name of 'love.'"⁶

F. I think there is some confusion here. Let's walk through Psalm 98 and then I want to help you understand why the surprise ending that might seem like bad news is a great promise that we want to hold on to.

V. There are 9 verses in Psalm 98. And they break out in three sections.

A. Verse 1-3 tell us to rejoice because God is the rescuer. **Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; think the Exodus or Conquest of Canaan his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love – the word here is *hesed*, it's the Old Testament version of agape love - and his faithfulness to Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.**

B. Verses 4 – 6 draw attention to God as King over all the earth, and calls everyone and everything to make noise. **Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn— shout for joy before the Lord, the King.**

C. Verses 7 and 8 continue to rally us forward. **Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord, and then we get the surprise, we realize that we have been thrown a curve ball - for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.**

VI. So there you go. This sounded like a feel-good rally cry – a “be-happy” pep talk - right up to the end. But then we have this statement about judgement. Who wants that? Well, you do. If you know Christ, it really is good news. Let me unpack this using four points.

VII. One: There must be a judgement day. There has to be a judgement day or life doesn't work.

A. I am not saying that there must be a judgement because the Bible says there is. (I believe the Bible and am persuaded by what it says, but I know some of you are not). Nor am I saying that there must be a judgement because we all have a sense of right and wrong imprinted on our heart – because deep down almost all of us think that life should be fair. (I think this imprint lines up with what Paul writes in Romans 1. I know Freud blames the church for this sense of conscience. And that others blame their grade school teachers – who are the first to start talking about your “permanent record.”). My point is, I am not saying that there must be a judgement day for these reasons.

B. What I am saying is, there has to be a belief that we are ultimately responsible for what we do, or society doesn't work and life has no meaning.

C. I get that not everyone thinks this way. I saw a sign on the side of a bus – sponsored by an atheist league, that said, “Forget God. Just be good for goodness sake.”⁷ And I know that lots of people think John Lennon was a prophet when he wrote, *Imagine*. The promise was that if we imagined that there's no heaven. No hell below us. Above us only sky. That everyone would get along. Peace, love and utopia would break out.

D. I know many people think this. But it's not how it plays out. And I can give you lots of examples.

1. You want philosophical arguments – read Plato⁸ or Nietzsche.

2. You want a historical example: look at the 20th century. The ugliest and most atrocious oppression came under the atheistic regimes of Stalin, Mau, Pol Pot, Ceausescu and others.

3. You want a political example, look at what our Founders said. I'm thinking of John Adams saying, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Washington and others said very similar things.⁹ They believed that we had to police ourselves because we could never afford to hire enough police to keep people in line, and if we did there would be no freedom.

4. You want an economic example, back in 2004, the Federal Reserve Bank published a report based on the economies of 35 countries that said, "In countries where large percentages of the population believe in hell, there seems to be less corruption and a higher standard of living."¹⁰

5. You want a funny example – go back and re-watch Ground Hog Day. And what you see is that once Phil – Bill Murray – realizes that there are no consequences to his actions, he announces, "I'm not going to play by the rules anymore." He steals money from a bank, punches out the insurance agent and seduces the attractive woman.

E. As our Founders feared and Nietzsche promised and as history has shown, when people stop believing in God, they do not raise their game – they do not treat others with kindness and love, they go for power.

F. There isn't time to develop this point adequately. In my notes I provide a bit more information. Let me simply note, Yale professor Miroslav Volf, a theologian from Croatia who has recently been teaching courses with former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair – writes about this in his book *Exclusion and Embrace*. He says, "My thesis is, the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance. This will be unpopular with people in the West. But what do you say to someone who has had their child killed? 'Violence doesn't solve anything. What kind of world will we have if everyone acts out?' No, what you say is, 'there is a judge that no one will escape.'"

G. At a more personal level, without judgement, we start to wonder if our life has meaning. The great playwright Arthur Miller has a play dedicated to this. It's called *After the Fall*.¹¹ He initially felt liberation by idea that there was no judge. But then he realized that if there is no judge, then nothing you do matters. If there is no judge, there is no meaning.

H. Point one – There must be a judgement day of society doesn't work and life has not meaning.

VIII. Point two is: There Can't Be a Judgement.¹²

A. Why not? Because we can't survive it. We are not just passive victims of evil. We are contributors. That means, if there is no judgement, we have no hope because society collapses. But if there is a judgement, we have no hope because we will be found guilty. Who can stand before a holy God?

B. Let me be clear. Our fear is not an unfair trial, it's a fair one. In Chicago – which is known for a bit of corruption – you might worry that you have a crooked judge or an incompetent attorney or that not all the facts will be known. You might not get justice because you are not getting a fair trial.

C. Those are not our problems in the final judgement. The judge is completely incorruptible, and He not only knows exactly what happened, he knows more than that. He knows what was going on in our heart. And He knows how much we understood about what was going on. God's judgment is based on our knowledge of the truth.

D. When you factor in what he says in some of his other parables – such as the pharisee and the Publican,¹³ or the Prodigal Son – you realize that people were not being judged by God on basis of their works but on their heart. (We dislike the arrogant Pharisees, but they kept the rules.)¹⁴ Which doesn't mean we are not judged on our works. Rom 2:6 and other passages – such as John 5:27 and Matthew 25 - say that we are.¹⁵

E. This may sound like a contradiction, but it's not. Our heart shapes our life – they determine our actions. By looking at our life – our works – you can tell about our heart. Jesus frames all of this by talking about a tree. In Matthew 7 he says, by their fruit you will know them. He is talking about a tree, but he is really talking about a person. How can you tell if a tree is alive and what kind of tree it is? By its fruit. Look at what grows on its branches.¹⁶

F. We have passages – such as Matthew 25 – where it sure seems like we are saved by our works. Did we care for the poor? Did we visit the prisoner. Are we helping the widow? If not, he says, "Depart from me." It's not that we are saved by our works, but our works testify to our heart. It is not Faith + Works = Salvation. But Faith = Salvation + Works.

G. So, what kind of fruit is your life bearing? A good heart = good works.

H. I do not want you to get lost in the details here. It's quite simple: 1) We are all going to be judged by Jesus; 2) The judgement will be fair.

1. No one is turned away from heaven because they rejected Jesus if they never heard about him. Our eternal destiny does not pivot on our answers to a Bible Quiz – name 10 of the 12 Apostles; a ten-year-old will be judged differently than a 40-year-old; a person with every advantage will be judged differently than one with no advantages.

2. We are judged based on what we know – and we all know there is a God. We can suppress that truth, but it keeps bubbling up. We all know that there is a God and we know that we should be kind to others. If that is all we know, we will be judged on that.. Schaeffer says we are all wearing a tape recorder, and it will record every time we say, "you ought..." to someone else. We are then judged by that. We are not judged for rejecting Jesus if we didn't know about Jesus. He will let the word you heard, and word you knew

I. So, 1) we are all going to be judged; 2) the judgement will be fair; and 3) that is a problem because we are not holy. Consequently, we are in deep weeds.

J. If there is not a judgment day, there is no hope for us. Society will collapse. But if there is a judgement day, there is no hope for us, because we cannot stand blamelessly before a holy God. The problem is not that we will get an unfair trial. The problem is, it will be fair. We're sunk. Both secular and religious approach is hopeless.

K. So how does this get resolved? How can this be a Psalm of hope and joy? The answer is –Jesus.

- IX. Point Three: Jesus changes everything. In Jesus Christ we not only have a judge, we have a defense attorney and our ransom. This is the Gospel
- A. Lots of religions say there is a judge. But not like Jesus – not a judge who is also our defense attorney. A judge who loves us and is willing to pay the penalty in full.
 - B. A judge who is willing to step in and fix everything. A judge who crying for a chance to let him fix it.¹⁷
 - C. Now, for the record, he is just, so the full payment must be paid. But this is where the fact that God is Triune changes everything. If God was not Triune – if there was one God in one person, then He could either be loving of just but not both. But as one God in three persons, he can demand justice and provide it at the same time.
 - D. Let me also clear up another small point of confusion for some. There are passages where Jesus says that He did not come to judge and passages where he says he comes to judge.¹⁸ How do those go together? It's all about tense. The first time he came it was not to judge it was to save. The next time he comes it is to judge.
 - E. OK, on to point four. Point 1: If there is no judgement, we are lost. Point 2: If there is a judgment, we are lost. Point 3: The way forward is with Jesus.
- X. Point Four: Because of Jesus, the coming judgment is a source of Joy.
- A. The world ahead is a world that works. A world void of evil and all the oppression and destruction it brings. All the war, famine, disease and so on. Wrongs are made right. The righteous are lifted up. Creation itself is freed from the ravaging effects of sin.
 - B. When this happens all of creation is free to sing God's praises. The oceans clap their hands and the hills sing.
 - C. Judgement is terrible news to evil and those who cling to it. It is wonderful news – pure joy – for those who embrace God.¹⁹
- XI. So where do you line up? Let me speak, generally, to two camps:
- A. If you do not know Christ, you need him. And you want him.
 - 1. You only got a part of his story today- we focused on his works. There is so much more that could be said about what he has done for you. His death in your place.
 - 2. On top of this, books have been written about his life and more have been written about his teaching.
 - 3. But the point is, you want him. And He wants you. You want his offer. You do not want to face judgement on your own. You do not want to have to pay your moral debt. He will pay. Declare bankruptcy and ask for forgiveness now. Come clean. When you invite Christ into your life the most amazing spiritual transfer takes place – you get rid of your sin and you gain Christ's righteousness.
 - B. If you know Christ, it's time to live wisely – aware that you are living between the two judgements.
 - 1. The first judgment was in past – it was God's judgement for your sin, and it was poured out on Christ. In light of that judgement, you are forgiven. I am NOT saying you are better than anyone else. You are not. You are just forgiven. Christ's death should make you loving and humble, not proud.

2. The next judgement is in the future and it is for the life you live. You are accountable for everything you do and say. If you have Christ, you have heaven. We can be assured. But you do not want to squander the opportunities for reward. You do not want to be foolish. You want to live today in light of eternity and eternal rewards.

3. If you forget about either one or these judgements, you will come up short. *Live in light of eternity.*²⁰

4. Jesus has modeled a path and clearly told us how to live. Love, serve, be generous. Share the Good News and invest in God's kingdom.

¹ Others are: 47, 93, 95, 96, 97 and 99.

² John 7:24; I Cor. 5:12f.

³ It's worth noting that – at least in the Gospel of John - the last thing Jesus says in public is about judgment.

⁴ Some argue that the judgment spoke of in Romans 2:6 is only for non-Christians. I disagree. Paul said, "God will render to EVERYONE according to his deeds," not just to unbelievers.

⁵ Today many of the skeptics I talk to say, as I once did, they can't believe in the God of the Bible, who punishes and judges people, because they "believe in a God of Love." I now ask, what makes them think God is Love? Can they look at life in the world today and say, "This proves that the God of the world is a God of love"? Can they look at history and say, "This all shows that the God of history is a God of love"? Can they look at the religious texts of the world and conclude that God is a God of love? By no means is that the dominant, ruling attribute of God as understood in any of the major faiths. I must conclude that the source of the idea that God is Love is the Bible itself. And the Bible tells us that the God of love is also a God of judgment who will put all things in the world to rights in the end.

The belief in a God of pure love—who accepts everyone and judges no one—is a powerful act of faith. Not only is there no evidence for it in the natural order, but there is almost no historical, religious textual support for it outside of Christianity. The more one looks at it, the less justified it appears. –Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*

⁶ Trevin Wax, Christianity Today, July / August 2012, p. 51.

⁷ This ad campaign was sponsored by The American Humanist Association.

⁸ In his Republic, Plato has Glaucon argue that that if you remove the threat of punishment, the righteous will behave no differently than the wicked.

⁹ Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect, that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

¹⁰ Fear of Nether World is a 'Disincentive to wrongdoing.'. Reuters, July 27, 2004.

¹¹ Quentin speaks and says: You know, more and more I think that for many years I looked at life like a case at law, a series of proofs. When you're young you prove how brave you are, or smart; then what a good lover; then, a good father; finally how wise, or powerful or what-the-hell-ever. But underlying it all,

I see now, there was a presumption. That I was moving on an upward path toward some elevation, where—God knows what—I would be justified, or even condemned—a verdict anyway. I think now that my disaster really began when I looked up one day—and the bench was empty. No judge in sight. And all that remained was the endless argument with oneself—this pointless litigation of existence before an empty bench.

¹² The outline for three of my last four points comes from a sermon by Tim Keller on John 12.

¹³ Luke 18:9

¹⁴ I Sam. 16 – Man looks at external, but God looks at the heart.

¹⁵ We do not get into heaven by passing a Bible content exam: who is the left handed judge? Name ten of the twelve apostles.

¹⁶ Matthew 12:33: Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. ³⁴ You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. ³⁵ A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. ³⁶ But I tell you that everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken. ³⁷ For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.

¹⁷ In John 12:44 we are told that, “Jesus cried out.” What does this mean? Intensity. It might be love or grief. The same word is used, and it’s a bit ambiguous. In context we see that Jesus is yelling about judgement. Jesus is crying out for people to trust him. It’s intense. Do not reject me. I am only way. And he is weeping as he says this. He says some very strong things here. If you reject me you reject the Father. It’s strong, but he is weeping.

¹⁸ John 5.

¹⁹ The Heidelberg Chatecism, Q52, is directed directly to this. Q: How does Christ’s return “to judge the living and the dead” comfort you? A. In all distress and persecution, with uplifted head, I confidently await the very judge who has already offered himself to the judgment of God in my place and removed the whole curse from me. Christ will cast all his enemies and mine into everlasting condemnation, but will take me and all his chosen ones to himself into the joy and glory of heaven.

²⁰ I am occasionally asked, will Christians have regrets in heaven? I’m not sure how to work this all out. I know some say, no chance because there are no tears in heaven. For the record, the Bible doesn’t say “no tears.” It says that God will wipe away our tears. I know that if you are in Christ you need not worry about judgement. Your destiny does not hang in the balance. It is secure in Christ. But there are degrees of reward.²⁰ Why not go all in? The apostle Paul’s language in 2 Corinthian 5 suggests this three-fold perspective: 1) it’s good to remain alive on earth to serve Christ and others (Phil 1:20); 2) on the other hand, it is better to die physically and enter fully into the presence of Christ (2 Cor. 5:6-8; Phil. 1:21b, 23).