

# The Potency of Right Worship

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## INTRODUCTION:

Many of the problems confronting modern Christians are the result of diligently trying to do the right thing . . . in the wrong categories. They try guitar fingering on a mandolin; they try chess rules on a backgammon board; they apply the rules of French grammar to English. And for us to draw attention to such mistakes is *not* to object to any of these things in particular—chess, guitar, backgammon, whatever. But this is the mistake we make whenever we try to “make a difference” and our activity does not proceed *directly* from a vision of the Almighty Lord, high and lifted up.

## THE TEXT:

*The LORD reigneth; let the earth rejoice; let the multitude of isles be glad thereof. Clouds and darkness are round about him: righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne. A fire goeth before him, and burneth up his enemies round about. His lightnings enlightened the world: the earth saw, and trembled. The hills melted like wax at the presence of the LORD, at the presence of the Lord of the whole earth. The heavens declare his righteousness, and all the people see his glory. Confounded be all they that serve graven images, that boast themselves of idols: worship him, all ye gods. Zion heard, and was glad; and the daughters of Judah rejoiced because of thy judgments, O LORD. For thou, LORD, art high above all the earth: thou art exalted far above all gods. Ye that love the LORD, hate evil: he preserveth the souls of his saints; he delivereth them out of the hand of the wicked. Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart. Rejoice in the LORD, ye righteous; and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness” (Ps. 97:1-12).*

## OVERVIEW:

God *reigns*, and the whole earth is called to rejoice (v. 1). His holiness is not what we might assume—His righteousness and judgment are like clouds and darkness (v. 2). A fire precedes Him, and burns up His enemies (v. 3). Lightning flashes, and the whole created order sees it, and trembles (v. 4). In the presence of God, hills and mountains melt like wax in a fire (v. 5). The heavens preach, and everyone sees His glory (v. 6). A curse is pronounced—confounded be all false worshippers, and all gods are summoned to worship the one God (v. 7). When this is proclaimed Zion hears and is glad. The daughters of Judah rejoice (v. 8). Why do we rejoice? Because the Lord is exalted high above all the earth (v. 9). This transcendent sense of true worship has potent ethical ramifications—you that love the Lord, hate evil (v. 10). In this setting, God delivers His people from those who return the hatred (v. 10). Light is sown for the righteous; gladness for the upright (v. 11). We are summoned by Him to therefore rejoice, and to give thanks as we remember His holiness (v. 12).

### **CLOUDS AND DARKNESS:**

Holiness is not manageable (v. 2). Holiness does not come in a shrink-wrapped box. Holiness is not *marketable*. Holiness is not tame. Holiness is not sweetsy-nice. Holiness is not represented by kitschy figurines. Holiness is not smarmy. Holiness is not unctuous. Holiness is not domesticated. But worship a god who is housebroken to all your specifications, and what is the result? Depression, and a regular need for sedatives—better living through chemistry.

Holiness is wild. Holiness is three tornadoes in a row. Holiness is a series of black thunderheads coming in off the bay. Holiness is impolite. Holiness is darkness to make a sinful man tremble. Holiness beckons us to that darkness, where we do not meet ghouls and ghosts, but rather the righteousness of God. Holiness is a consuming fire. Holiness melts the world. And when we fear and worship a God like this, what is the result? Gladness of heart.

### **GLADNESS FOR THE UPRIGHT IN HEART:**

Worship the god who does nothing but kittens and pussy willows, and you will end in despair. Worship the God of the jagged edge, the God whose holiness *cannot* be made palatable for the middle class American consumer, and the result is deep *gladness*. Do you hear that? Gladness, *not* pomposity. And, thank God, such gladness does not make us parade about with cheeks puffed slighted out, or speak with lots of rotund vowels, or strut with sanctimonious air. Gladness, laughter, joy—set *these* before you. This is deep Christian faith, and not what so many are marketing today in the name of Jesus. The tragedy is that in the name of relevance the current expression of the faith in America today is superficial *all the way down*.

### **YE THAT LOVE THE LORD . . . :**

Hate evil. So this is why an ethical application of the vision of the holy is most necessary. If we bypass this vision of who God actually is, the necessary result will be a prissy moralism, and not the robust morality of the Christian faith. The distance between moralism and true morality is vast, and the thing that creates this distance is *knowledge of the holy*. Those who content themselves with petty rules spend all their time fussing about with hemlines, curfews, and scruples about alcohol. But those who see this folly and go off in their own little libertine hipster direction are no better. The former act as though their moralism is grounded on the dictates of a gremlin-like god who lives in their attic, but his word is *law*. The latter say that this is stupid, and aspire to become the gremlin themselves. There are two parts: love the Lord. Hate evil.

### **THE POTENCY OF RIGHT WORSHIP:**

In this psalm, how should we define right worship? The answer is that *right worship* occurs when the congregation of God approaches Him, *sees Him as He is*, and responds rightly, as He has commanded—in joy and glad submission. Such worship necessitates

turning away from all idols (v. 7), and turning to the holy God who *cannot* be manipulated. And in this psalm alone, what does right worship do? What effect does it have? What are the results? The earth rejoices (v. 1). All the islands are glad (v. 1). His enemies are consumed with the fire that goes before Him (v. 3). The earth is illuminated by His lightning, and trembles (v. 4). In the presence of the Lord (and in worship we *are* in the presence of the Lord), the hills melt (v. 5). The heavens preach, and the people see His glory (v. 6). Idolaters are flummoxed, confounded (v. 7). The universal call to worship is even issued to the idols (v. 7). Zion hears and is *glad*, and the daughters of Judah *rejoice* (v. 8). The name of God is exalted above every name (v. 9). The saints of God learn to hate evil, and God preserves them from those who persecute them (v. 10). Light and gladness are sown in our hearts (v. 11). His righteous people rejoice, and are grateful when they remember His holiness (v. 12).

### **A CALL TO WORSHIP:**

Those who *serve* graven images are confounded (v. 7). Those who worship false gods cannot be anything but confounded. Those who worship the true God falsely are missing the scriptural call as well. But those who worship rightly will inherit the earth.



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