

## **Advent Psalms: The Lord Is Come**

**Psalm 98:1-9**

**By [David Strain](#)**

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Throughout the Christmas season here at First Presbyterian Church, we have been using some of the psalms to help us reflect together on the meaning of Christ's first coming. And tonight, we've come to the last in our Advent messages, looking this time at Psalm 98. So do please turn there with me in your copies of God's Word. You can find it on page 500 in the church Bibles.

Psalm 98 contains no direct Messianic reference. There is no direct allusion to a coming Savior anywhere in this psalm. So you might wonder, as we read it together, "Why is it relevant for Advent and for Christmas?" Well in 1719, Isaac Watts wrote a hymn based on Psalm 98. He called it, "Messiah's Coming and Kingdom," although we know it today as, "Joy to the World!" And we'll sing that hymn at the end of our service. You might not realize that Watts' beloved Christmas carol isn't a Christmas carol at all. It wasn't written, at least not in Watts' mind, to speak about the first coming of Jesus. Actually, it's speaking about His final return. It's not talking about Christmas Day; it's talking about Judgment Day. But then, along came Lowell Mason about 100 years later – 1839. And he set Watts' words to the tune we now know, adapting it from a couple of different places in Handel's Messiah, and suddenly changed how we understood Watts' song altogether. Now we think of it as an Advent song, as a song about the birth of Christ, His first coming. So Mason saw Psalm 98 as a song about the first coming of Jesus and its consequences for the world. Watts read Psalm 98 as a song about the return of Jesus and its consequences for all creation.

But actually, as we are going to see as we look at Psalm 98 together, they were both right. They were both right. The birth of Christ began something that He will return to finish. The birth of Christ inaugurated a new creation, and when He returns, new creation will be consummated at last. Jesus was born to bring about a new world and He will come back to establish it. New creation erupted into the middle of the old world with the birth of the virgin's child, and new creation will finally swallow up death and sin and hell forever when Jesus comes again.

You remember how in Dickens', *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge was visited by three ghosts. There was the ghost of Christmas past, the ghost of Christmas present, and the ghost of Christmas yet to come. And the experience was completely transformative for Scrooge. Do you remember? And there is a sense in which Psalm 98 is also about Christmas past, present, and yet to come. Psalm 98 lifts our gaze to focus on the birth of Christ that we celebrate and commemorate as finished in the past, to remember and rejoice in its consequences in the present, and to look forward to the day when He shall come again to judge the living and the dead.

Look at the passage with me just for a moment. You might remember, those of you who are regular worshippers here, a few weeks ago on Sunday evening we looked at Revelation chapters 4 and 5 and the extraordinary explosion of worship that the apostle John saw in heaven, rolling outward in concentric circles with the throne of God and the Lamb at the center of heaven, and there is worship moving outward and outward towards all creation. It sweeps up into its song every angel and the whole church, and eventually reaches all creation. The creation itself begins to reverberate in praises to God. Well Psalm 98 does exactly the same thing. In verses 1 to 3, we see God's salvation. In verses 4 to 6, the people who have been saved begin to sing praises. And then in 7 to 9, the sea and the rivers and the mountains join the song. Creation itself begins to adore their great God and their Savior.

Psalm 98 overflows with joy. It is a perfectly suitable Christmas song. It overflows with joy because God's salvation has come and is coming again and it will sweep up everything in its scope. That is a message, I think, we badly need to hear this Christmas Eve. Amidst all the uncertainties and sorrows of our time, all the uncertainties and sorrows of this past year, all the sorrows that have etched themselves into your heart, isn't it good to know that because of Jesus' birth in the past, all things, even death, one day will be made right and made new. Everything sad will come untrue, and even creation itself will sing praises to our great King. Knowing that coming reality is sure because the baby of Bethlehem is now reigning at the right hand of God in heaven, knowing that that coming reality is sure, helps us live today and tomorrow and to face 2022 with great hope and with trust in the Lord.

Before we read the psalm together, let me invite you please to bow with me as we pray and ask for the Lord to help us. Let's pray together.

*Our Father, we ask You now to open our eyes and open our ears and open our hearts. Give us receptivity. Give us teachability. Speak to us and ignite within us as we hear Your voice, ignite within us joy, joy that is consistent with this great psalm as we bless Your name for the great Christmas gift of Your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.*

Psalm 98. This is the Word of God:

A psalm.

Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

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

Let the sea roar, and all that fills it; the world and those who dwell in it! Let the rivers clap their hands; let the hills sing for joy together before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

You notice Psalm 98 begins with a summons, with a call, a command. Look at verse 1. "Oh sing to the Lord a new song," which feels to me at least a little ironic at Christmas, because most of the songs that we sing are old! We've sung a few of them tonight. Maybe you've been singing them on your Christmas playlist for weeks now. They're all old, aren't they? Psalm 98 isn't saying that we are not allowed to sing our favorite Christmas carol, neither is it requiring constant musical innovation. The "new song" isn't new in the sense of having been recently composed. It is new in the sense of being wonderfully fresh and alive and vibrant all over again.

Think about Scrooge on Christmas morning after the ghost of Christmas yet to come visited him. He wakes up and he realizes none of what he saw has happened yet, and he's overcome, isn't it? He's overcome with relief. He's been given a second chance. He is gripped with sudden joy. He throws open the windows of his home, he buys the giant goose for Bob Cratchit and his family, and then he goes capering down the street wishing people a Merry Christmas, much to their astonishment. What's happened? Christmas Day is the same as it is every year. Christmas Day isn't new. But Ebenezer Scrooge is new, and that made Christmas new for him all over again.

Maybe you've come to Christmas services like this one all your life. Maybe you've heard the Christian Gospel a thousand times before. You've sung all the songs, you've read all the stories; there are no surprises here. And you're quite right. Ours is an old, old story. Our songs, they are ancient and they are venerable; Psalm 98 not least among them. But listen, when God saves you, when He breaks into your heart and He makes you new, in that instant,

everything else becomes new as well. The old, familiar Christmas carol that you can sing on pure muscle memory without a second thought, when salvation erupts into your heart, that old Christmas carol suddenly becomes new and fresh and vibrant and alive. I wonder if you know anything about that? Do you know that experience for yourself?

And if you look at verses 1 through 3, you'll see that's what Psalm 98 is all about. It's about the wonder the psalmist feels and he wants you to feel at God's amazing salvation. "Oh sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things! His right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God." Notice first of all and most important who saves. Who does the saving? "Salvation belongs to the Lord. He has done marvelous things. His right hand and His holy arm have worked salvation for Him." God has acted in sending His Son. The initiative was all His.

Do you see that word "marvelous" in verse 1? "He has done marvelous things." That's a really disappointing translation. The word is "wonders." "He has worked wonders." It really means "miraculous" and "supernatural." "Oh sing to the Lord a new song; He has done miraculous things!" That's the scale of the intervention that we need, you see – you need and I need. It's not a bit of help along the way. It's not a few words of encouragement. We need a miracle, an intervention from heaven. And that is what God has done in our hopelessness and helplessness, dead in trespasses and sins, utterly unable to rescue ourselves. God has come in person to be your rescuer in Jesus Christ. That's what Gabriel said to Mary. You remember the words? "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God. Nothing will be impossible with God." It's a miraculous moment and everything changes in its wake. God has acted to rescue us in Jesus Christ. It is a wonder. It is the great wonder of wonders – the gift of His Son.

No surprise the skies split over the shepherds' heads in astonished, angelic songs. In the baby cradled in Mary's arms, "God's right hand and holy arm worked salvation for Him." "Unto you has been born this day in the city of David, a Savior, Christ the Lord!" "Sing a new song to the Lord; He has worked wonders!" Hasn't He worked wonders? Do you feel any of the wonder? He has come to bear your sin, to take your guilt away forever, to reconcile you to God, to bear your condemnation that you might live. What a gift! What a gift you have been given by Almighty God in His Son, Jesus Christ! He has done marvelous things.

And notice who this salvation is for. Who is entitled to receive the gift? Who is qualified to accept it? Look at verses 2 and 3. "The Lord has made known his

salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations. He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness to the house of Israel. All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.” Who is this Christmas gift for? What name is on the wrapping paper? Your name! Your name is on the wrapping paper! This gift is made out to you. All the ends of the earth; everyone, everywhere. Now that’s a gift worth singing about, isn’t it? It’s a gift you don’t need to qualify to receive. You don’t have to clean up your act. You do not have to persuade God to love you. You couldn’t do any of that if you tried, by the way. He came for you in your sin and guilt and unworthiness. “While you were yet sinners, Christ died for us” is the good news. While we were helpless and lost, indifferent and cold, hostile and adverse to the Gospel, He came for us. And now He offers you new life as a gift, for free, through Jesus Christ. Your name is on the wrapping paper. This is a gift held out to you. Why would you leave it under the tree unopened, unreceived, unwelcomed? You don’t need to fix yourself up to be a Christian. You don’t need to qualify. God loves you in your sin, despite your sin, with your mess intact, and He gave His Son for you to make you His child.

And the rest of the psalm really is just about how to respond. When you get that, what happens in your heart? It’s like a bell is struck and it begins to reverberate with notes of praise. That’s what happens in your heart when you really begin to get the scale and scope and wonder of what God has done in Jesus. So he says, “sing,” verse 1. Verse 4 talks about the sound of melody. I know many of you here tonight, myself among you, are very grateful the psalm also says we can settle for making a “joyful noise.” Alec Motyer actually translates “joyful noise” as “shout aloud.” You can do that much, can’t you? Maybe “melody” is a bit of a stretch, but you can “shout aloud.” I have in my mind the image of someone watching their favorite team score the winning point in the final seconds of the game. It’s been a nail-biter. They’ve been on the edge of their seats the whole game. And as the clock ticks down, they score the winning point, they secure the win for the team, and this person erupts out of their chair, their fist pounds the air, and they shout for joy!

God has dealt decisively with the deepest need of your heart. He has done something that eclipses the trivial pleasures of your team’s win when He plucked you from the jaws of hell by plunging His Son into its horrors in your place at the cross. How should you respond this Christmas to the gift of God in Jesus Christ? You should shout aloud. You should make a joyful noise. You should erupt from your chair and pump the air with your fists and say, “God has saved me! Praise the Lord!”

And then look at verses 7 through 9. The praise doesn’t stop at sinners, me and you, redeemed by the gift of Jesus Christ. The praise ripples on to sweep the whole creation itself up into it till the world, the cosmos reverberates with wonder and adoration. Do you notice that? The roaring seas mingle their voices with our shouts of praise in verse 7. The rivers clap their hands in jubilation. The hills burst into song before the Lord, “for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge

the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.” What is going on? It is Romans 8:19. You remember Romans 8:19? “The creation itself waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but in hope that him who subjected it might bring it again from the bondage to corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.” A great change is coming for a broken world one day. A great change is coming. Darkness will be dispelled forever and there will be no more night. Death will be undone and swallowed up in the victory of life. Sin will be eradicated and every tear wiped from our eyes and all things will be made new, and in that day, the hills will erupt in praise and the seas and the rivers and the trees will clap their hands – when Jesus Christ returns, when the babe of Bethlehem who became the man of Calvary, who right now reigns as the Lord of glory returns to judge the living and the dead.

Do you remember how Isaac Watts put it in “Joy to the World”? “Joy to the world, the Savior reigns! Let men their songs employ. While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains, repeat the sounding joy!” The whole creation itself rises to its tiptoes in praise to God. All things made new when Jesus comes back again. And so yes, we ought to look back with great joy for what has already been done and rejoice that today, right now in the present, we are recipients of God’s amazing grace. So great a salvation and so great a Savior. But we don’t stop there. We look forward to a coming horizon when He shall come again to judge the living and the dead. And that’s why we sing, “No more let sin and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make His blessings flow, far as the curse is found.” The cursed and broken creation made new. The curse lifted forever in a new heavens and a new earth. He rules the world in that day with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of His righteousness and the wonders of His love.

That is our hope this Christmas. Is it yours? Not just a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger, not even a man stripped and bloodied and beaten and hung up on a cross, but a King, crowned and reigning upon His throne and returning soon to reign in a new heavens and a new earth, a home of righteousness forever. So may all the old songs become new songs for you this Christmas because Jesus has made you new, He has made you new. And more than that, may He fill you with a sure and certain hope as you look for the great day, fast approaching, when new hearts and new songs reverberate with joy in a new creation at last. May the Lord bless you then, may the Lord bless your families, and may He give you a very Merry Christmas and a very happy New Year.

Let’s pray together.

*Father, we thank You for everyone gathered here, for the sound of little children, for those who are nearing the end of their race, for children back from college, for loved ones and friends visiting from out of town. We rejoice in Your amazing*

*kindness to us, for the sense we have of being one in a common Redeemer, a common Savior; for being family. We pray for those in our midst who are grieving the loss of loved ones. There are empty seats in our homes and around our tables this year, in some of our families. And amidst the tears, we pray, therefore, O Lord, that they might know resurrection hope and joy not found in circumstances but found in our Christmas hope that one day all things will be made new. And we pray for every person here, that each of us may take the gift that is offered to us in Jesus. Our names are written on the gift. It is offered to us; it is available to us. He is for us! Help us to receive Him that our songs might be made new because our hearts are made new, that we may find our place in the new creation when our King returns. For we ask this in Jesus' name, amen.*

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