

God's Triumph:

His Presence

Psalm 114

By
Dr. Dallas R. Burdette

Website: www.freedominchrist.net

God uses psalms to give knowledge of His holy history in order to evoke praise from His people. We cannot read Psalm 114 without a consciousness of God's presence among us. This psalm is an encouragement to us during any age. In this psalm, the psalmist articulates his faith in the on-going sovereignty of God. As the writer recounts the story of the Exodus (1446 BC), we witness the presence of God in the lives of the children of Israel. This poetic book is an affirmation of the faith that lies at the heart of the entire Bible. We, in the reading of this story of God's deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage, are aware of God's activity in space and time in bringing about the fulfillment of His promises to Abraham to bless all nations through his seed.

This Spirit-filled piece of literature is still relevant to us. Just as God was active in Israel's release from Egyptian bondage, so God is still active in a new exodus from bondage through Jesus Christ on the Cross. The church of redeemed ones reads this poetry through the lenses of what happened to Judah and Israel through Jesus Christ. Perhaps, it is in this vein that Paul writes to the Corinthians:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ²They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:1-4)

Surely, as Jesus and His Apostles joined their voices in the singing of this psalm, this consciousness of God's actions, no doubt, was in the mind of Jesus our Savior. As we reflect upon this particular inspired piece of poetry, we cannot help but recall the Divine foreknowledge of God made known in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. This heart-wrenching writing of the psalmist not only reveals who God is and what He has done, but it also

gives us comfort today to know that God is still active in working for the salvation of humanity. Almost two thousand years ago, John, one of the Twelve, records God's activity among the Israelites. In his prologue to his Gospel, he writes:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴ In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. (John 1:1-5)

But the most startling thing is that John did not stop there, he continues this scenario about the Word with: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14). Is it any wonder that Matthew begins his Gospel with thoughts about the fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah concerning the virgin birth? Listen to Matthew as he recalls the words spoken by Isaiah over seven hundred years earlier:

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 'The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel'—which means, 'God with us.' (Matthew 1:22-23)

The presence of God flashes like neon lights throughout this psalm. Just as God was with the children of Israel, so, also, God is still with His people. Just as Psalm 114 connected place and people with meaning and hope, so God still gives us meaning and hope through His Son Jesus. We should never forget that our Lord Jesus, along with His disciples, sang this psalm during His final Passover meal. Yes, God still rules all people and times. The story of the Exodus belongs to the plot line of the coming of God's kingdom as foretold by Daniel (Daniel 2).

THE TRIUMPH OF GOD HIMSELF

As we peruse Psalm 114, we quickly discover that this psalm is not about the triumph of the People, but rather, it is about the triumph of God Himself. We witness God going before His people, and it is before Him that "The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back" (114:3a). Also, it is before Him that "the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs" (114:3b). This marvelous piece of Holy Spirit writing is generally recognized as a psalm of praise, even though the word praise does not occur within its poetic structure. In spite of its brevity, this particular writing rings with exuberance, with excitement, with energy, and with liveliness. Listen to the words of the author as he seeks to capture in poetic form the story of the Exodus and the crossing of the Jordan under Joshua¹ in order to elicit praise from the reader and hearer of this psalm and to evoke encouragement for the oppressed people of God.

¹The Book of Joshua covers a period of time from 1406 BC to 1385 BC, which covers twenty-one years of history.

When Israel came out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue, ² Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion. ³ The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; ⁴ the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. ⁵ Why was it, O sea, that you fled, O Jordan, that you turned back, ⁶ you mountains, that you skipped like rams, you hills, like lambs? ⁷ Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, ⁸ who turned the rock into a pool, the hard rock into springs of water. (Psalm 114:1-8)

This psalm is the second in the Egyptian Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118). The first two verses record the movement of the Exodus to settlement in the land of Canaan. Next, the psalmist details the events surrounding their departure from Egypt in poetic language (vv 3-4). Then, he, in verses 5 and 6, sets forth rhetorical, or symbolic, questions concerning the sea and mountains. In these two verses, the writer uses the same language employed in verses 3 and 4. And, finally, the psalmist, in verses 7 and 8, gives an answer to the questions in verses 5 and 6.

What is the answer? Listen once more: “Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord” (v. 7a). It is “the Lord,” the Sovereign Ruler, whose omnipotence and power over all creation makes the mountains fluid and the seas solid. In poetic language, the writer reveals God as making the waves as solid as a wall and the mountains to vibrate.

JUDAH AND ISRAEL HIS SANCTUARY

When Israel came out of Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of foreign tongue, ² Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion. (Psalm 114:1-2)

The psalmist says, “Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion” (v.2). The writer is saying that God chose Israel for His holy place. The Hebrew for “God's sanctuary” is *יְשׁוּבָה*, *l'qōd·šō'*, “for his holy place”). This translation of the Hebrew—“God's Sanctuary”—may refer to Israel as a nation or to the Jerusalem Temple. But, if the phrase refers to Israel, then the writer is simply saying that Judah has become the people of God, that is to say, His holy throne. In the Book of Exodus,² God reveals His intent concerning the nation of Israel to Moses: “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy (*יְשׁוּבָה*, *qā·dōš'*) nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites” (Exodus 19:6). God declares Israel to be both His sanctuary and His kingdom.

Just as God dwelt in Israel, so God still continues to dwell with His people. Today, the Christian community is both God's sanctuary and His kingdom and His priests. Christians constitute a holy nation and a kingdom of priests. It is in this regard that Peter writes: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (*ἔθνος ἅγιον*, *ethnos hagion*), a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). Every believer is a priest of God. Every one is to declare the praises of Him who called him or her out of the kingdom of Satan. We, as Christians, become a royal priesthood because of the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit. Paul, in this same vein, writes: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have

²The Book of Exodus begins its history in 1876 BC until the birth of Moses in 1526 BC. Moses died in 1406 BC. Between Exodus 2:1 and 3:2—eighty years expired.

received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

John, in the Book of Revelation, calls attention to the status of God’s saints: “You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth” (Revelation 5:10). God has made His people to be a “kingdom and priests” to serve Him. We, as priests of God, offer ourselves up as sacrifices. Paul reminds the Christians at Rome:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (Romans 12:1-2)

How do we reign today? We reign by serving others; this is how Jesus rules within our midst. James, our Lord’s brother, also calls attention to serving others: “Religion (q̄r̄hskeiva, t̄&r̄hskeia) that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world” (James 1:27). James defines worship as looking after orphans and widows and keeping oneself from the pollution of the world, not as five acts performed on Sunday morning. The author of the Book of Hebrews also zeros in on service to others:

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name.¹⁶ And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Hebrews 13:15-16)

Jesus redeemed us that He might bring us into God’s service. We, as God’s people, have been delivered in order to serve Him. We are set free to glorify Him. To praise Him is to worship Him. **Adoration and reverence must not be confused with a prescribed place, a set time, nor a prescribed ritual performed on Sunday morning. Worship is not an activity that is confined to a specific place, time, or form.** As believers, we are God’s Temple in which He now dwells. This means that we can worship anywhere and at any time. God goes with us in an abiding presence. Remember, the Church is not a building made with brick and mortar, but rather the Church is made with living flesh (1 Peter 2:5). Whether we, as Christians are assembled as a corporate body of believers or whether we are going about our daily activities, we never cease our worship.

Worship is not primarily an external activity performed on Sunday morning, but rather worship is our way of life twenty-four hours a day. Worship is not energized by the performance of certain rituals performed between the hours of 9am and 10am on Sunday morning. It is not *where* we worship; it is not *how* we worship; but it is *whom* we worship (see John 4:24).³ Returning again to Psalm 114:2, the psalmist goes right to the heart of God’s claim on Israel and Judah: “Judah became God’s sanctuary, Israel his dominion.” We must not forget

³For an in-depth study of John 4:24, see Dallas Burdette, “Worship: An Analysis of John 4:24,” in Dallas Burdette, *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Jesus and Our Responsibilities*, Vol., 1 (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2009), 426-438.

that God's intent was and is for us to be holy. God wants all of us to glorify Him. We may glorify God through praise. Asaph, too, offers the ultimate goal of praise: "Whoso offereth praise glorifieth me" (Psalm 50:23).⁴

For the psalmist, worship is ascribing glory to God. We may glorify God through singing, preaching, praying, giving, communion, eating, drinking, producing fruit in our lives (love, joy, peace), and doing good works as a way of life. It is in this vein that Jesus says, "let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). The KJV renders the word *praise* as *glorify*. To praise is to glorify and to glorify is to praise. Again, Jesus says, "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (John 15:8). Paul, too, cautions individuals to keep in mind that whatever they do should be done to God's glory: "**So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God**" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Yes, worship is nothing less than glorifying God. A proper concept of worship will influence our behavior twenty-four hours each day.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD AT WORK

The sea looked and fled, the Jordan turned back; ⁴ the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs. (Psalm 114:3-4)

Once more, the psalmist seeks to call attention to God's deliverance of the Israelites by commanding the Red Sea and the Jordan to "flee." The Red Sea refers to the beginning of their journey from Egypt (Exodus 14:10-31), and the Jordan refers to the driving back of the waters of the Jordan (Joshua 3) so that the people could pass into Canaan at the end of their forty years of wanderings in the wilderness. The psalmist calls attention to Mount Sinai—"the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs"—to remind the readers of God's cosmic sovereignty. This reference to the mountains and hills could possibly refer to events that Moses describes in reflecting back upon the frightening actions on the day that he and the people "stood at the foot of the mountain":

Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, ¹⁹ and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him. ²⁰ The LORD descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain. So Moses went up ²¹ and the LORD said to him, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the LORD and many of them perish." (Exodus 19:17-21)

Again, **we witness the sovereign God at work concretely in space and time.** Today, we still perceive God at work in ordinary events. We also observe this concrete work of God in "the virgin birth" through Mary (Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:22-23). We view God acting

⁴The King James Version, (Cambridge: Cambridge) 1769.

concretely in space and time in the Atonement of Christ upon Calvary. Paul reminds the churches throughout the province of Galatia of God's involvement in humanity's rescue from condemnation.

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, ⁵ to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. ⁶ Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba, Father." ⁷ So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4:4-7)

God acted in space and time to free us from bondage and made those of us who respond to His Good News of salvation by grace through faith in Christ His children. Also, just as God the Father exercised power over all chaotic forces, so we also observe Jesus exercising this same power with His disciples (Mark 8:3-27). In this same chapter, we observe Jesus feeding four thousand with seven loaves (vv. 8-13). In addition to this power over the forces of nature, He also heals a blind man of the town of Bethsaida (vv. 22-30).

Matthew, too, records a number of miracles performed by Jesus in his Gospel (Matthew 8-9). One such miracle was in the raising of a dead girl (9:18-26). But this miracle was not all of the activities of Jesus in space and time. In the eighth chapter of the Book of Matthew, he reveals an incident concerning a furious storm on the lake in which His disciples were extremely frightened. They awoke Jesus from His sleep and informed Him about the seriousness of this storm. As we read this pericope, or section, we cannot read this episode without recalling this same power that God exercised over nature in the Exodus, which power the psalmist explains. Listen to Matthew as he captures His response and their response to His astounding miracle:

He replied, "You of little faith, why are you so afraid?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm. ²⁷ The men were amazed and asked, "What kind of man is this? Even the winds and the waves obey him!" (Matthew 8:26-27)

GOD'S PRESENCE PERVADES THE UNIVERSE

Why was it, O sea, that you fled, O Jordan, that you turned back, ⁶ you mountains, that you skipped like rams, you hills, like lambs? (Psalm 114:5-6)

In these verses, we perceive that these two Scriptures are similar in nature to verses three and four. Yet, there is this one difference. For instance, the writer now expresses what was stated in the first two verses with questions. Why did the sea flee? Why did the Jordan turn back? Why did the mountains skip like rams? Why did the hills skip like lambs? The answer is obvious—God's presence pervades the universe. The psalmist is asking the underlying question: If God is for Israel who can be against her? Neither Pharaoh nor the forces of nature can prevent God's actions in space and time. In the last two verses of this psalm, the psalmist gives the answer to the above questions—"The presence of the Lord."

THE EARTH TREMBLES IN GOD'S PRESENCE

Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob, ⁸ who turned the rock into a pool, the hard rock into springs of water. (Psalm 114:7-8)

As stated earlier, this psalm is a poetic pronouncement of the faith that underlies the complete Bible. In poetic fashion, the psalmist depicts the earth as trembling at the presence of the Lord (v. 7). This psalm calls attention to the seas, the rivers, and the mountains moving only in the presence of the Lord. He says that the Lord “turned the rock into a pool” and “the hard rock into springs of water.” **These two verses constitute the climax of this Egyptian Hallel Psalm about God's involvement in space and time.** God intervened for Jacob's salvation. God was constantly at work for Israel's redemption.

Not only did every Jew have Psalm 114 to rally behind in their belief about God's power, but we, too, have Psalm 114 in Paul's letter to the Christians at Rome. Not even Pharaoh could prevail against the children of Israel. Just a reflection from the Book of Exodus concerning the Exodus from Egypt reveals that the seas, the rivers, nor the mountains could stand against the ones God called out of Egypt. God was in control. So it is with every believer today. Pay attention to Paul as he captures the essence of Psalm 114 in his book to the Roman Christians:

What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall **trouble** or **hardship** or **persecution** or **famine** or **nakedness** or **danger** or **sword**? ³⁶ As it is written: “For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39)

Paul lists seven forces arrayed against us—trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, and sword. Yet, in spite of all of these calamities, all these forces of destruction will still bow in the presence of God. Paul says that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” How can we triumph in the face of hardships? The answer to this question is found in the fact that God has His love fixed upon us. It is in this regard that Jesus says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him” (John 3:16). Again, we should give heed to Paul, as cited above: “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:31-32). Is it any wonder that the psalmist exclaims: “Why was it, O sea, that you fled, O Jordan, that you turned back, ⁶ you mountains, that you skipped like rams, you hills, like lambs?” (Psalm 114:5-6).

CONCLUSION

What is our reaction to Psalm 114? Is this psalm a poetic affirmation of our own faith in God and our own faith in Jesus His Son? Do we look at redemption from condemnation as an Exodus from the darkness of Satan's kingdom into the kingdom of God's dear Son—the kingdom of light? This psalm invites the earth to tremble in His presence. Do we tremble in the presence of God? If not, why not? Are we conscious that we face judgment apart from Jesus Christ? Do we view the Death and Resurrection of Jesus as another example of God's intervention on the part of lost humanity? It is significant that in the birth of the Messiah, we again witness a cosmic event—God became flesh. Again, in the Cross of Calvary, we see a scandalously concrete event in God's scheme of redemption—the shame of the Cross (Hebrews 12:1-2).

Do we go on as if all is well? Do we proceed in our daily lives as if we do not need a Savior? If this is true of us, then we need to encourage each other to learn from nature—“Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob” (Psalm 114:7). Do we tremble in the presence of the Lord? Have we surrendered our lives to Jesus? Have we kissed the Son? An earlier psalm expresses it this way:

Kiss the Son, lest he be angry and you be destroyed in your way, for his wrath can flare up in a moment. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalm 2:12)

Are we willing to take refuge in Him? The invitation is extended to us all. John, an Apostle of Jesus, says, “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life” (Revelation 22:17). Do we tremble in the presence of the Lord? Just what does Psalm 114 mean to us? Can we read this psalm without feeling that we are in the presence of the Lord? Are we conscious of God's presence in our salvation? Once more, is our refuge in Him? **Have we kissed the Son of God?** What are our priorities in life? Do we stand in awe of God's grace?

What does Psalm 114 mean to us? Are we inviting people to come to Jesus for salvation? How do we picture the “bride” of Christ? Is the bride of Christ simply an ecclesiastical organization? We can say that the Church is the unity of God's people. It is a communion of people. The Church is the messenger of God's redeeming mercy to the lost world of humanity. The Church of Jesus is from above, not from below. In other words, the Church has its source in God, not men and women. Finally, we can also say that the Church is the community of those who live by faith in the finished work of Christ upon Calvary for the sins of humanity. God's people should apply Psalm 114 as an evangelistic tool to tell people about God who evokes praise from His people.