

**HOW DO YOU PICTURE GOD?**  
**Psalm 99**  
**Baraca Radio Sunday School Class**  
**First Baptist Church, Anderson, South Carolina**  
**July 15, 2018\*\*\***  
**Lawrence Webb**

**INTRODUCTION**

In a seminary cafeteria, as students entered the serving line, they saw a bowl full of apples. A sign next to the bowl said, “You must take only one apple. God is watching you!” At the far end of the line, just before the cashier, there was a big plate of cookies. The sign by the cookies read, “Take all the cookies you want. God is at the other end, guarding the apples.”

This story -- supposedly true -- is about much more than cookies and apples. The story is really about God---how we think about God. Who God is. How God relates to us, His creatures.

Which God do you worship: If you think God is standing by, ready to zap you if you get out of line, your God is the God of the apples.

Back in the colonial days, Puritan church services would drag on for two hours or more. If a person followed his natural inclination and nodded off during a long sermon, someone stood ready to wake up the sinner. Men sat on stools at the back of the church, holding rods about as long as fishing poles. If you dozed off, you could count on getting bopped on the head with the fishing poles.

Those bopping sticks came to symbolize Puritan strictness. Colonial leaders saw themselves as God’s rule enforcers, with a divine commission to keep people on the strait and narrow.

But back to that cafeteria line: we see a different understanding expressed at the cookie plate: “Take all the cookies you want. God is at the other end, guarding the apples.” This sign really meant, “God is not a policeman, waiting for your slightest mistake. It’s really OK to enjoy yourself.”

You have to decide which end of the cafeteria line describes God. If we look to Jesus to indicate what God is like, we discover Jesus liked to have a good time.

Some people accused Jesus of being a drunkard [*oinoptes*] because He went to banquets and

enjoyed good food and drink. He wasn’t a long-faced, straight-laced loner. It does not seem incidental that the first miracle in John’s Gospel involved turning of water into wine at a wedding party (John 2). Jesus and His disciples clearly attended a meeting where people enjoyed a robust good time. In the symbolism of the cafeteria line, Jesus chose the cookie sign over the apple sign. I’ve never been to a sad wedding. Have you?

We do have other pictures of Jesus in the Gospels portraying Him as stern, severe. So the Bible presents various pictures of God and of Jesus, but we may tend to overlook the times of celebration.

### **TRANSITION TO PSALM 99**

The 99th Psalm has four different pictures of God in its nine verses:

The God of Might

The God of Right

The God of History, and

The God of Forgiveness

### **THE GOD OF MIGHT (Verses 1-3)**

The first three verses and a little of verse four describe God's might and power:

A common characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism, in which the writer says essentially the same thing two different ways. You see that pattern in the first two verses:

The Lord reigns. He is enthroned. He is great. He is exalted. He is great and terrible.

Because of His power, people tremble, and the earth quakes. Listen to these verses:

*The LORD reigns; let the peoples tremble!*

*He sits enthroned upon the cherubim; let the earth quake!*

This picture of God sitting on the throne among the seraphim describes the area in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple--the area known as the Holy of Holies. That space contained a box, the ark of the covenant. The box or ark contained the Ten Commandments and other sacred tokens. The lid was known as the Mercy Seat. Carved figures stood atop the Mercy Seat, seraphim, representing angels. They thought God's power especially present in the Holy of Holies at the Mercy Seat. Mention of trembling also indicates God's power. We tremble when we think of great power.

*The LORD is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.*

He is over Zion, another name for Israel. He is over all the peoples.

*Let them praise thy great and terrible name!*

*Holy is he! Mighty King,*

God's holiness points to His being separate from us, apart from us, high above us. Recall Isaiah's inaugural vision. He says, "I saw the Lord, high and lifted up, and the hem of His robes filled the Temple." Then one of the heavenly creatures in the vision cried, "Holy, Holy, Holy."

As we acknowledge God's power, we need always to remember it is God's power and not our own. National leaders -- including this nation's leaders -- tend to get things twisted around, claiming the might and power of God as they rage against

other nations. Our nation has continued in wars now for nearly two decades, begun as George Bush claimed the power of God in his decisions.

Even as national leaders often claim the power of God in war, individuals sometimes try to use physical power in the name of God. For example, I have received this email several times:

A university professor tries to shock his freshman class. He declares he is an atheist and dares God to strike him down---if God exists. The lecture room stands silent several minutes as professor and students presumably wait to see whether God will accept the challenge.

After a time, an older student, a newly enrolled Marine veteran, breaks the silence. He strides to the lectern and hits the professor with his fist, knocking him unconscious. When the professor revives, he asks the student why he did this. The student answers, "God was busy. So he sent me."

I doubt this ever happened, but the story intends to get a good laugh. However, it presents several problems. The story assumes Almighty God needs protection. It assumes Might Makes Right. Also, in real life, the professor would have had the Marine thrown out of the class and brought assault and battery charges against the man.

God the Mighty One doesn't need us to defend Him. God the Almighty One doesn't deputize us to exercise military or physical strength against those we see as our national or personal enemies. The Almighty One uses His might to redeem the human race.

### **THE GOD OF RIGHT (Verses 4-5)**

As we think of the God of Might, we tremble, we quake.

But verses 4-5 point to another dimension of God.

God the Mighty King also Stands as the God of Right, lover of justice: *Mighty King, lover of justice, you have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.*

*Extol the Lord our God; worship at his footstool. Holy is he!* Again, think of Isaiah.

The Almighty God is concerned that the downtrodden be given fair treatment. The scales of the justice system often are weighted against the poor and the uneducated. Economic justice is often skewed in favor of those who are already well off and against the needy.

We hear criticism of the so-called Social Gospel. But I don't believe there's any other kind of Gospel. In Luke, chapter 4, Jesus begins His ministry by declaring Himself the champion of the poor and the prisoner:

*And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found*

*the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind,*

*to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."*

Throughout His ministry, Jesus reached out to the sick, the blind, the deaf, the hungry, the sinful, and brought them to Himself. To be authentic, the church and we as individual Christians can do no less than follow His example.

Most of our state and national leaders claim to be Christian. Then they separate immigrant children from their illegal parents. They do away with programs that help poor people send their children to college. They neglect wounded military men and women who lie in rat-infested hospitals. They ignore threats to the environment. And they are working to do away with Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

A nation has responsibility to administer justice and equity. But individuals also have responsibility to see that justice and righteousness are carried out in their realms of influence.

I have vivid memory of one farmer who stood for the right, opposing those motivated by revenge toward a group they felt had wronged them. I've told this before, but it's worth telling again.

For several years, drought caused widespread loss of crops near the Texas Panhandle. With no sign of an end to the long dry spell, some farmers took it on themselves to solve the problem. They changed the course of a creek that ran through the area. By this, they had water to irrigate their land and have successful crops.

Then, at last, rains came to the area, and that was good. But it was also bad. The rains came in such abundance that the creek overflowed its banks, flooding some of the very land that had suffered such extreme dryness and causing loss of crops from too much water.

Some who had no part in diverting the creek lost crops when the rains came. So this group decided to sue their neighbors who came up with the big idea of using the creek for irrigation.

I became aware of this because I was pastor of a tiny little church in that farm community, and had members on both sides of the law suit — some who changed the direction the creek flowed. Others had no part in it. So church members faced off against church members in the pending law suit.

But one man made a difference. This one man stood for what he felt was right. As the group met to plan their strategy, this one man said, "I can't go along with suing my neighbors."

He defused the issue by saying, "I'm going to have to live with these people, day by day, week by week, win or lose. It's not going to be worth it if we *do* win." This

man, by the way, was not a church member. His wife was in the church, but he was not a professing Christian. Still, he stood for right. He thought more of his neighbors than he thought of any potential gain from winning the law suit. This man stood for right, reflecting principles of the God of Right.

Listen again to the God of Right in verse 4 of the 99th Psalm:

*Mighty King, lover of justice, thou hast established equity;  
thou hast executed justice and righteousness in Jacob.*

As we follow In His Steps, we will

*Extol the LORD our God; and worship at his footstool! declaring Holy is he!*

## **THE GOD OF HISTORY**

Along with picturing the Lord as the God of Might and the God of Right, in verses 6-8, we see the God of History. The psalmist calls on his Jewish readers to think back to specific moments in their history when God led their ancestors. We see the names of Moses, Aaron, and Samuel. The poet says these men *cried to the LORD, and he answered them*. Their faith is not based on some theological abstraction. Rather, they believe in a God who intervened on behalf of their forefathers. We read about God being with the brothers Moses and Aaron in the Exodus from Egypt. Verses 6-8:

*Moses and Aaron were among his priests. Samuel also was among those who called on his name. They cried to the LORD, and he answered them. He spoke to them in the pillar of cloud; they kept his testimonies, and the statutes that he gave them. O LORD our God, thou didst answer them;*

With the Exodus, the Jews became a united people, with a strong awareness of God as the One True God, the God who had a purpose for them as a Chosen People.

Several generations after Moses and Aaron, Samuel arose as a prophet in a time when the people were gaining a national consciousness and seeking a king as a nation among the nations.

The psalmist says all three men were *among those who called on his name. They cried to the LORD, and he answered them*.

Just as the Jews look back to the Exodus as a formative moment as a people, Christians look back to the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. His resurrection became the foundational moment, for Christian history. Without the resurrection, there is no meaning for Christianity.

You probably don't have to think very far back in your personal history to see how God made a way for you, times God brought you through difficulties.

## **THE GOD OF FORGIVENESS**

There's one more picture in Psalm 99. The briefest space is devoted to this picture, but it ties God's entire portrait gallery together. He is the God of Forgiveness.

As the psalmist looks back to those pioneers of the faith, he declares in verse 8: *thou wast a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings.*

In the faith relationship, forgiveness plays a crucial part. We stand before the God of Might and Right, acutely aware of our sin, grateful that He is also the God of Forgiveness.

On a human level, we've seen multiple slayings of young men, frequently young *black* men, killed needlessly. Some of those families came forward to say they forgave the killers.

One mother, a Mrs. Ferguson, said, if she had a chance to talk with the accused killer, she would tell him that she forgave him. She said teenagers: "a lot of times . . . don't know what they're doing. That's all I'd say and forgive him."

She said Demetrius worked out often and donated time to Habitat for Humanity. He was often late for school. But he was on time Monday when the shooting occurred. She said, "We were running a little late, but we weren't late enough. But it's OK. It's in God's hands. Let his will be done,"

She honored her son's wishes on another significant matter: He went to get a state ID card and became a registered organ donor at age 13 (Flanagan).

This grieving mother's spirit reflects the greater forgiveness God the Eternal Father extends to you and me through His Son Jesus Christ. Psalm 103 says God has removed our sins as far as the east is from the west. And that's quite a distance (103:12).

We stand in awe of what we can never know of God in this life. Harry Emerson Fosdick, founding pastor of New York's Riverside Church, drew an analogy with the Atlantic Ocean that stretches some 16-hundred miles across from the United States to Europe. Or nearly 29-hundred kilometers.

Dr. Fosdick said, in essence, you don't have to get out in the middle of the Atlantic to have some understanding of that body of water. In speaking to New Yorkers, he said, Your apprehension of the sea may be limited to the waters around the Statue of Liberty or Long Island Sound or perhaps Cape Cod or Bar Harbor. If he'd been in South Carolina, he could have said Myrtle Beach or Charleston.

But Dr. Fosdick says, you *can* know the sea. It has a near end. You can wade in the waters of the Atlantic from Florida to Nova Scotia -- bathe in it, sail over it, or simply sit and meditate by it.

So it is with God. We cannot comprehend His greatness, His vastness. But we see Him at the near end through His loving forgiveness through Jesus Christ our Lord (Fosdick 43ff).

## **COLUMN WRITTEN FOR HER**

The psalmist has given four pictures of God -- the God of Might, the God of Right, the God of History, and the God of Forgiveness. As he considers all of these,

the psalmist calls out in the final verse: *Extol the LORD our God, and worship at his holy mountain; for the LORD our God is holy!*

In short, this verse calls us to give thanks. Again, the very last word of this Psalm says *Holy*.

In that regard, I want to tell you a cause for thanks I had several years ago. At that time, Pansy and I went to yard sales practically every Saturday. Also, at that time, I was writing a religion column once a month for the Anderson Independent-Mail newspaper, and they ran a picture of the writer each week. In my column the week before, I wrote about yard sales and how we collected children's books and stuffed toy animals for the Craddock Ministry Center over in Cherry Log, Georgia. I also stressed the uncertainty of life and how the things we treasure lose their value when we die.

Well, on the morning in question, we stopped at a house in Regency Park on the west side of Anderson. As we browsed, a lady came over, smiling broadly, and asked, "Are you the man who writes the article in the paper?" I didn't know her, but assumed she recognized my picture with the column, so I said, "Yes, Ma'am."

She said, "I saw your story about collecting animals and books for children, and I have a big bag full of toys I set aside. I knew you would be coming by." She said, "That column was for me."

Then she began pouring her heart out to me about the very recent death of her husband and how that had made her aware of how material things lose their value, just as I had stressed in the article that got her attention. This newly widowed lady was only fifty; her husband was only fifty-seven.

She kept saying, "That column was written for me." Then I made a confession. In preparing for that column, I wrote an earlier piece I had intended to give the editor, but, somehow, it didn't fit.

I have no memory of what I wrote in that earlier article. I only remember I just wasn't satisfied. So I started from scratch and wrote the yard sale story. So I agree with the lady. That column *was* written for her.

The woman introduced Pansy and me to her parents and to her deceased husband's sister. They all had pooled their treasures, bringing them to the widow's house for the yard sale. She reminded them of my column she had posted on her refrigerator door.

She gave us not only a big bag of stuffed animals but also a box of children's books and teaching materials we took along on our next trip to Cherry Log.

Though I had no notion of it when I wrote that article, I firmly believe the Lord led me to prepare that article to speak to that dear lady and her family. So we had a tearful good time, thanking the Lord for His intervention in their lives through something I wrote.

## **SUMMARY**

These four pictures are by no means a complete picture of God. In Romans (11:33), Paul marvels: *O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?"*

### **BENEDICTION**

Now, as we conclude another Baraca Radio Bible Class, I pray you have gained a clearer picture of God and that you will claim His promises:

God's love that will never let you go,

God's grace that is greater than all your sin,

And God's peace that passes all understanding.

These are yours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.