

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 96

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalm 96 is a full enthronement hymn calling all the earth to worship the LORD as the one true King. The psalm moves in three discernible waves. The first (vv. 1–6) opens with a triple summons to sing a new song, declares the LORD’s name worthy of proclamation among the nations, and contrasts His glory with the nothingness of the gods. The second (vv. 7–9) shifts to a direct address to the families of the nations, issuing a liturgical call to ascribe glory and strength to the LORD and to come before Him in holy splendor. The third (vv. 10–13) announces the LORD’s kingship to the whole created order — heavens, earth, sea, fields, and trees — calling all creation to rejoice at His coming to judge the earth with equity and truth. The psalm’s dominant movements are proclamation, ascription, and anticipation.

This Text — Intent

God is using this psalm to dismantle the misplaced worship of His people and of the nations, and to reorient every worshiping impulse toward Himself as the only one worthy of it. The psalm is not primarily instructing the reader *about* worship — it is itself an act of worship that pulls the reader into its own motion. God intends, through this text, to recalibrate the reader’s fundamental orientation: away from the idols that are literally nothing (v. 5), toward the LORD whose glory, strength, and righteousness are absolute and universal. The anticipatory movement of verses 10–13 adds an eschatological urgency — the coming Judge is also the coming King, and all creation’s joy is grounded in the certainty of that arrival. The intent is reoriented, expansive, joyful worship — not as a religious duty but as the only rational response to who the LORD actually is.

Subject Sentence: The LORD alone is worthy of universal worship — creation, nations, and history all belong to Him.

Primary Claim: God is calling every voice, every nation, and every corner of creation to abandon worship of anything less than Himself and to join the chorus that anticipates His righteous reign — because He alone is glorious, He alone is real, and He alone is coming to set everything right.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “New Song” (v. 1) Some interpreters read the “new song” primarily as a reference to Israel’s unique covenant song — the song given to the redeemed community distinguished from the nations. This reading partially holds: the summons does go first to those who already know the LORD’s name (v. 2, “tell of his salvation from day to day”). However, the psalm immediately expands the call to “all the earth” (v. 1), “all peoples” (v. 3), and “families of the nations” (v. 7), which makes it impossible to confine the new song to a private Israelite liturgy. The Reformed reading is that the “new song” is new in the sense of eschatologically fresh — it is the song that the whole renewed creation will sing when the LORD comes to reign (vv. 10–13). Its novelty is not ethnic but cosmic. The covenant community is the first to sing it precisely because they are the bearers of the proclamation mandate (vv. 2–3), not the exclusive possessors of worship rights.

The “Gods” of the Nations (v. 5) A significant interpretive decision turns on the Hebrew *elilim* — translated “worthless idols” (ESV), “idols” (NIV), or “nothing” (NASB). Some traditions soften this to acknowledge the gods as spiritually dangerous but real entities (a reading with some canonical support, cf. Deuteronomy 32:17; 1 Corinthians 10:20). The psalm’s own logic, however, presses toward ontological negation: the contrast is between the LORD who *made the heavens* (v. 5b) and gods who *are* nothing. Their nothingness is not merely moral inadequacy — it is creational irrelevance. They did not make anything; they will not judge anything; they have no glory to give. The Reformed reading rightly insists on this: the gods are not rival powers to be feared but vacancies to be pitied and abandoned. This does not require denying demonic reality elsewhere in Scripture — but this psalm is not making that point here. Here the point is stark: the LORD is; the gods are not.

The Judgment of Verse 13 Dispensational readings sometimes locate the “coming to judge the earth” (v. 13) exclusively in a future millennial or end-times event distinct from the church age. This reading captures the text’s genuine eschatological orientation but artificially separates the psalm’s anticipation from present worship. The Reformed reading understands the coming judgment as the horizon that gives present worship its urgency and joy — it is the *certainty* of that coming that makes “let the heavens be glad” (v. 11) not wishful but warranted. The psalm’s present-tense imperatives (sing! declare! ascribe! worship!) and future-tense orientation (he is coming, v. 13) are not in tension — the coming is the reason for the present singing. Worship now is participation in the anticipatory chorus. This is Christologically significant: the New Testament identifies the coming judging with Christ (cf. Acts 17:31; Revelation 19), so Christian exposition rightly reads verse 13 as the coming of the one the psalm does not yet name.

No significant interpretive divergence exists on the psalm’s basic genre, structure, or ethical demand. The principal debates are about scope (who is included), ontology (how real are the gods), and eschatology (how to locate the judgment). On all three, the Reformed reading gives the most coherent account of the psalm’s own argument.

Key Canonical Support

- **Isaiah 42:10–12** — The “new song” to the LORD appears again at the dawn of the new exodus, expanding the call to coastlands, wilderness, and distant peoples; corroborates that the new song is not ethnic but eschatologically universal.
- **Deuteronomy 32:21 / 1 Corinthians 10:20** — The background to “worthless idols” (*elilim*) — Moses identifies the gods as demons; Paul applies this to Corinthian idol feasts; together they show that behind the nothingness of idols lies misdirected worship, and this psalm’s call to redirect it is both urgent and necessary.
- **Acts 17:24–31** — Paul’s Areopagus address mirrors Psalm 96’s logic precisely: the one who made everything (v. 5) does not live in temples made by human hands; He has fixed a day of judgment; and He has appointed the judge (v. 13). Paul is preaching this psalm to the philosophers, naming what the psalm anticipates.
- **Revelation 5:9–10; 7:9–10** — The “new song” reaches its canonical fulfillment in the throne room of Revelation, where a multitude from every nation sings to the Lamb. Psalm 96’s global summons is not hyperbole — it is prophecy.
- **Romans 1:18–25** — Grounds the psalm’s anti-idol logic theologically: the suppression of the knowledge of the Creator-God and the substitution of creature-worship is the root spiritual catastrophe Psalm 96 is directly addressing. The psalm is the positive countermovement to the fall described in Romans 1.

Aim: To show that all worship is either rightly aimed at the LORD or fundamentally misdirected — and to call the reader into the wide, joyful, creation-encompassing chorus that this psalm both commands and embodies.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1–2	Triple summons: “Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth; sing to the LORD, bless his name.”	The repetition of “sing to the LORD” three times is liturgically emphatic — the command is not soft.
2b–3	Tell of his salvation daily; declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all peoples.	The congregation’s worship spills immediately into proclamation — doxology and mission are one motion.
4–5	For the LORD is great and	The “for” is load-bearing —

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	greatly to be praised; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the peoples are worthless idols (<i>elilim</i>), but the LORD made the heavens.	the summons is grounded in ontological reality. Verse 5 is the psalm's most polemical assertion.
6	Splendor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.	A pivot from negation (idols are nothing) to positive description of the LORD's court.
7–8a	Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the nations, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength; ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name.	The nations are not spectators — they are addressed directly. The call to “ascribe” repeats three times (vv. 7–8).
8b–9	Bring an offering and come into his courts; worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.	Both reverence and approach — holiness does not exclude but orders the nearness.
10	Say among the nations, “The LORD reigns!” Yes, the world is established; it shall never be moved; he will judge the peoples with equity.	The proclamation mandate now reaches its content: the LORD reigns. This is not a future wish but a present reality to be announced.
11–12	Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar, and all that fills it; let the field exult, and everything in it! Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy.	Creation joins the chorus — the psalm's vision of worship is cosmological, not merely congregational.
13	Before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his faithfulness.	The eschatological ground of all prior joy: His coming is certain; His judgment is right; His faithfulness is absolute. The double “for he comes” is emphatic.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–6	The Summons to Worship: Who the LORD Is Among the Gods
2	7–9	The Call to the Nations: Ascribe What Is Already His
3	10–13	The Proclamation to Creation: The Coming King-Judge

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD alone is worthy of universal worship — creation, nations, and history all belong to Him.

Primary Claim: God is calling every voice, every nation, and every corner of creation to abandon worship of anything less than Himself and to join the chorus that anticipates His righteous reign — because He alone is glorious, He alone is real, and He alone is coming to set everything right.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine what you are actually singing toward. (*Mind/Belief*) The psalm’s opening triple imperative — “sing to the LORD” — assumes that singing is already happening in us. We are always oriented, always exulting in something, always generating the emotional surplus we call praise. The question this passage presses is not whether you worship but *what you worship*. Before you can join the new song, you must name the old songs: the achievements, the relationships, the securities, the identities you exult in most naturally. Psalm 96 does not begin by improving your worship — it begins by relocating it. The LORD, not an improved version of your existing loyalties, is the object.

2. Feel the weight of the word “nothing.” (*Affections/Worship*) Verse 5 does not say the idols are less than God, or weaker than God, or inferior to God — it says they are *elilim*: nothings, nobodies, literally the null-gods. The gods you have built a life around — reputation, financial security, a certain kind of family, the approval of people whose opinion you cannot stop checking — are not rival powers. They are vacancies. This passage calls you to feel that: not primarily as a moral correction but as an emotional one. The grief of discovering you have been exulting in nothing is exactly what frees you to exult in Someone. Let the psalm make you feel the absurdity of what you have been worshipping.

3. Understand that your worship has a proclamation dimension you cannot opt out of. (*Mind/Belief*) Verses 2–3 move without pause from “bless his name” to “tell of his salvation from day to day” to “declare his glory among the nations.” In this psalm, doxology and mission are not two different activities — they are the same motion seen from two angles. When you worship the LORD rightly, you are simultaneously bearing witness to the nations

that the LORD is who He says He is. The congregation gathered on Sunday is not a private club of enthusiasts — it is a proclamation event. Your participation in corporate worship is an act of public theology. Ask what it means for your life among your neighbors, your city, your actual circles, that you are a person who sings this particular song.

4. Practice the specific posture of verse 9 — both trembling and approaching.

(Affections/Worship) “Worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness; tremble before him, all the earth.” The call is neither casual nor cold. The psalm does not permit the breezy, therapeutic worship that has no weight, nor the distant, fearful piety that has no joy. Trembling and drawing near exist together here — you are being ushered into a court of genuine holiness by a genuinely holy King, and that should produce both reverence and delight simultaneously. Examine the texture of your own worship: if it has no weight, this text is a correction; if it has no warmth, this text is also a correction.

5. Let the certainty of His coming change how you live in the present. *(Will/Behavior)*

Verse 13 is not a consolation prize at the end of a hard psalm — it is the engine that drives the whole. Creation rejoices (vv. 11–12) *because he comes* (v. 13). The coming of the righteous Judge is the reason everything else in the psalm holds. For the believer, this means the injustices you are living with — the unresolved wrongs, the situations where the wicked appear to prosper and the righteous suffer — are not permanent. They are pre-verdict. The Judge is coming and He will judge in *faithfulness* (v. 13b). This is not a coping mechanism — it is a world-view. Let it produce in you the freedom to stop trying to enforce your own verdicts and to live as a person who trusts the coming of the only One whose verdicts are right.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 96 makes the case for exclusive monotheism not primarily through argument but through doxology — the LORD’s greatness is so absolute that the very act of describing it leaves the gods of the nations as ontological zeros. The psalm teaches that God’s uniqueness is not one attribute among others but the condition for all other attributes: He alone is great (v. 4), He alone made the heavens (v. 5), He alone has splendor and majesty and strength and beauty (v. 6). His coming judgment (v. 13) is further grounded in His righteousness and faithfulness — categories that are covenantal, not merely juridical. The psalm therefore teaches that the God of Israel is not a tribal deity among competing tribal deities but the Creator-King whose reign encompasses all nations and all creation, and whose coming is not a threat to the worshiping community but its greatest joy.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 96 sits at the intersection of three Reformed commitments: the sovereignty of God, the missional vocation of the covenant community, and the eschatological grounding of present worship. The LORD's kingship (v. 10) is not aspirational — it is declared as present fact to be announced among the nations, which reflects the Reformed understanding that Christ's reign is not postponed but inaugurated and advancing. The anti-idol polemic of verse 5 anticipates Calvin's famous description of the human heart as an idol factory — and the psalm's remedy is not behavioral self-improvement but a reorientation toward the one whose glory cannot be rivaled. The eschatological movement of verses 10–13 grounds worship in something more stable than experience or feeling: the certain, righteous, faithful coming of the King. Reformed worship, properly understood, is always both celebratory and anticipatory — Psalm 96 gives that conviction its fullest Old Testament expression.

Main Takeaway

The LORD is not asking for a portion of your worship — He is summoning all of it, from every voice, every nation, and every created thing, because He alone is real and everything else you might worship is literally nothing. The coming of the righteous King-Judge is not a distant theological concept — it is the ground beneath your feet, the reason creation itself is already singing, and the one truth that makes “sing a new song” not a religious instruction but the only sane response to the universe as it actually is.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the psalm to a worship-service pep talk.** The most common mishandling of Psalm 96 is treating it as a manual for congregational enthusiasm — “we should worship with more energy, more commitment, more passion.” The psalm is making an ontological argument about who the LORD is and what the gods are not. The call to exuberant worship is grounded in verses 4–5 and 13 — in the nature of the LORD, not in the insufficiency of current congregational affect. Preach the *reason* for the song before you call for the singing.
- **Spiritualizing “the nations” out of their specific gravity.** Verses 3, 7, and 10 address “the nations,” “families of the nations,” and all peoples with unmistakable specificity. The temptation is to interpret these as a poetic intensifier for “everyone generally.” But the psalm is making a missiological claim: the people who know the LORD's name are commissioned to carry the proclamation beyond themselves. Flatten “the nations” and you lose the psalm's missionary ecclesiology — the gathered community is constituted as a sent community by this text.

- **Softening “worthless idols” to avoid offense.** Verse 5’s *elilim* is a deliberately sharp word. The preacher may be tempted to modulate it toward “other priorities” or “things that compete with God” — language that is relatable but strips the text of its force. The psalm is making a claim that the idols are *nothing* — not lesser goods but non-goods, vacancies. Application that does not land the full weight of that diagnosis will produce listeners who feel mildly encouraged to prioritize God better, rather than listeners who recognize they have been exulting in ontological absurdity.
- **Missing the eschatological engine in verse 13.** The psalm’s closing verses are sometimes treated as a theological postscript or a general assurance of divine justice. But “for he comes” (repeated twice) is the reason everything else in the psalm holds. The joy of verses 11–12 is explicitly grounded in verse 13. Preaching that omits or minimizes the eschatological coming will produce a truncated worship call — enthusiasm without foundation. The coming of the Judge is not a fear-inducing addendum for unbelievers; for the worshiping community, it is the deepest reason for the new song.
- **Failing to connect verse 13 to Christ in Christian exposition.** The New Testament is explicit that the coming judge-king is Jesus Christ (Acts 17:31; Revelation 19:11–16; 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10). A Christian exposition that treats verse 13 as a generic divine-justice affirmation without naming Christ misses the canonical payoff the psalm anticipates. The new song that began in Psalm 96 reaches its fullest form in Revelation 5:9 — and the righteous judge arriving in verse 13 is the one whose name the psalm does not yet know. Name Him.
- **Preaching aspiration without proclamation.** The psalm’s imperatives are proclamatory, not merely aspirational: “say among the nations, ‘The LORD reigns!’” (v. 10). The sermon that closes with “let us worship God more fully” has followed the psalm partway but not all the way. The psalm drives toward a public claim — the LORD *reigns* — that must be spoken outward, not just practiced inwardly. The homiletical close should put that declaration in the mouths and lives of the congregation, not merely warm their hearts toward better private devotion.