

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 98

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalms 98 is a royal enthronement hymn calling all creation — Israel, the nations, and the natural world — to sing a new song to the LORD because He has acted decisively in salvation and justice. The psalm moves in three clear movements: verses 1–3 announce *why* praise is due (the LORD has won a marvelous victory, revealed His righteousness, and remembered His covenant faithfulness to Israel before all the nations); verses 4–6 call Israel and humanity to *erupt* in jubilant, instrument-accompanied praise; and verses 7–9 expand the summons to the whole created order — sea, rivers, mountains — because the LORD is coming to judge the earth with righteousness and equity. The psalm is thus simultaneously backward-looking (what the LORD has done), present-erupting (praise now), and forward-leaning (the Judge is coming). Its claim is not static; it presses toward consummation.

This Text — Intent

God is seeking through this psalm to dislodge the reader from complacency, small-sightedness, and a domesticated view of salvation, and to replace it with a worshiping astonishment at what He has already accomplished and confident expectation of what He will yet accomplish. The psalm wants to produce a *new song* — not a recycled religious habit but fresh, erupting, full-throated praise born of genuine encounter with God’s saving acts. It wants the hearer to feel the incompleteness of half-hearted worship in the face of such a victory, and to join the cosmic choir that has already begun.

Subject Sentence: The LORD’s saving victory over all the earth demands a new song from all creation.

Primary Claim: God is summoning every voice — human and cosmic — to erupt in new, uncontained praise, because what He has done in salvation and what He will do in final judgment together make anything less than full-throated worship an absurdity.

Interpretive Evaluation

The “New Song” and Its Referent

The most significant interpretive question is the scope of “His salvation” (v. 2) and the nature of the “marvelous things” (v. 1). Three positions exist. First, a *purely historical* reading takes the psalm as celebrating a specific military or covenantal deliverance in Israel’s past — the exodus, a Davidic victory, or the return from exile. This reading captures the concreteness of the text’s language (“His right hand and His holy arm,” v. 1; “remembered His love and His faithfulness to Israel,” v. 3) and must not be discarded. Second, a *Messianic-eschatological* reading, dominant in the New Testament’s use of this psalm, understands the “salvation” as the definitive saving act of God in Christ — particularly His resurrection and coming reign. This reading is strongly supported by the New Testament’s application of “new song” language (Revelation 5:9; 14:3) to the Lamb who redeems, and by the psalm’s own forward thrust toward final judgment (v. 9). Third, a *merely generic* reading treats the psalm as a timeless call to praise God because He is good — evacuating the psalm’s concrete salvation-history grounding.

The Reformed reading holds together the first and second without collapse: the psalm is *historically grounded* in God’s covenant faithfulness to Israel and *typologically/eschatologically fulfilled* in Christ. The “marvelous things” include the exodus and Davidic history but are not exhausted by them — the psalm’s own eschatological horizon (v. 9) and its canonical position within the Psalter’s final movement point beyond itself to the King whose coming will be the final word. The generic reading is refuted as a failure to take the text’s historical concreteness and eschatological press seriously.

The Role of the Natural World (vv. 7–9)

Pentecostal and some Charismatic readings sometimes spiritualize the creation’s praise as pointing to a coming spiritual renewal or revival among the nations. The text does not support this reading — the sea, rivers, and mountains are addressed as *creation itself*, not as metaphors for people groups. The Reformed reading, following the creation-groaning-waiting motif of Romans 8:19–22, takes the creation’s summons to praise as genuine cosmic eschatology: creation itself — currently under the bondage of the curse — will participate in the praise that bursts forth when the King arrives to judge with equity. This is not merely poetic hyperbole but a genuine theological claim about the scope of Christ’s redemption.

“Judge” as Good News

A consistent pitfall across traditions is reading “He comes to judge” (v. 9) as a warning that interrupts the praise rather than a reason *for* the praise. The text is unambiguous: the coming judgment is itself cause for praise (“let them sing before the LORD, *for* He comes to judge,” v. 9). Lutheran preaching occasionally handles judgment themes as Law-intrusion that must be resolved by the Gospel. Here, the judgment *IS* gospel news — because the Judge is the Righteous One who will finally set all things right. This reading is native to the psalm, consistent with the prophetic tradition (Isaiah 11:4; Revelation 19:11), and must be preserved.

Key Canonical Support

- **Exodus 15:1–21** — The Song of Moses: the original “new song” erupting from Israel after the LORD’s decisive victory at the sea; Psalm 98 stands in deliberate continuity with and extension of this salvation-song tradition.
- **Isaiah 52:7–10** — “The LORD has bared His holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God”; virtually the same language as Psalm 98:2–3, now applied to the herald announcing the return from exile and, canonically, the gospel proclamation.
- **Romans 8:18–22** — Creation’s groaning and eager expectation of liberation; provides the New Testament’s theological grounding for Psalm 98’s summons to the created order, showing that creation’s longing for the righteous Judge is not merely poetic but eschatologically real.
- **Revelation 5:9–10** — The “new song” sung to the Lamb who was slain; the New Testament’s most explicit application of Psalm 98’s new-song motif, identifying Jesus as the one whose saving act fulfills and surpasses every prior covenant deliverance.
- **Revelation 19:11–16** — The King who comes to judge in righteousness; the eschatological fulfillment of Psalm 98:9 — the righteous Judge arrives and the creation’s praise reaches its culmination.

Aim: To shatter domesticated, routine worship by showing from Psalm 98 that God’s salvation — grounded in covenant history, fulfilled in Christ, and consummating in final righteous judgment — demands a new, erupting, cosmic song, and to call the reader to join it.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1a	Command: “Sing to the LORD a new song”	Opens with imperative; “new song” signals a fresh, unprecedented act of God requiring a fresh response
1b	Basis: “for He has done marvelous things”	<i>kî</i> (for/because) — the praise is grounded in God’s acts, not in a general disposition to praise
1c	His right hand and holy arm	Anthropomorphic language

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	have won victory	of warrior-conquest; “holy arm” signals divine power exclusive of human aid
2	The LORD has made known His salvation; revealed His righteousness to the nations	Salvation is <i>public</i> — not merely private or internal; the nations are witnesses
3	He has remembered His love (<i>hesed</i>) and faithfulness to Israel	Covenant categories — <i>hesed</i> (steadfast love) and <i>emet</i> (faithfulness); salvation flows from covenant, not arbitrary favor
3b	All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God	Global scope established; no corner of creation is excluded from the witness
4	Call to “all the earth” to shout joyfully, burst forth, sing praise	Moves from Israel to all humanity; “burst forth” (<i>pāṣaḥ</i>) suggests an uncontainable overflow
5–6	Sing praise with instruments — harp, singing, trumpets, horn	Praise is embodied, physical, loud, structured; not merely internal or whispered
7	Sea and all it contains, the world and all who dwell in it, roar	Creation itself recruited; the scope expands beyond humanity to cosmos
8	Rivers clap their hands; mountains sing for joy	Striking personification; rivers and mountains join the choir
9a	“Before the LORD, for He comes to judge the earth”	The <i>reason</i> for cosmic praise: the Judge is coming — judgment here is cause for celebration, not dread
9b	He will judge the world with righteousness, peoples with equity	<i>Mîšôl</i> (equity/uprightness) — the final verdict will be right; all injustice will be addressed

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
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Division	Verses	Label
1	1–3	The Foundation of the New Song: What the LORD Has Done
2	4–6	The Summons to Humanity: Erupt in Praise
3	7–9	The Summons to Creation: The Whole Cosmos Joins the Choir

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD’s saving victory over all the earth demands a new song from all creation.

Primary Claim: God is summoning every voice — human and cosmic — to erupt in new, uncontained praise, because what He has done in salvation and what He will do in final judgment together make anything less than full-throated worship an absurdity.

Applications (Five)

1. Examine whether your praise is genuinely “new” or merely habitual. (*Mind/belief*)

The psalm’s opening imperative — “Sing a new song” — is not a command to sing a new worship song from this year’s catalog. It is a call to worship that is *freshly grounded* in a genuine reckoning with what God has actually done. A new song requires a renewed mind — a mind that has recently revisited the marvelous things, the bare arm of the LORD, the steadfast love remembered at the cross. Examine the last time your praise genuinely surprised you. If you cannot remember, the problem is not your playlist — it is that you have stopped letting the gospel generate new astonishment. Return to the acts of God. Let them produce the song.

2. Let the global and cosmic scope of Psalm 98 cure your tribal worship. (*Mind/belief*)

Verses 2–3 and 7–9 insist that God’s salvation is witnessed by the nations and sung by the seas, rivers, and mountains. If your worship life is functionally confined to your congregation, your tradition, or your generation, Psalm 98 has not yet done its work in you. The LORD’s salvation is not a private arrangement — it was made known before all nations and will ultimately gather every creature into its praise. Pray for and pursue fellowship with the global church. Let the breadth of God’s saving purposes stretch your imagination for worship beyond what is familiar and comfortable.

3. Let the coming judgment fuel your praise rather than dampen it. (*Affections/worship*)

Verse 9 is the psalm’s climax, and it presents the coming judgment not as a threat appended to the hymn but as the supreme *reason* for cosmic joy. The rivers clap and the mountains sing *because the Judge is coming*. If the prospect of Christ’s return produces anxiety rather than praise in you, you may be confessing something about where your trust actually sits. The Judge who is coming is the Righteous One who has already absorbed the sentence against you. His coming means not exposure but vindication, not condemnation

but the final rightness of all things. Train your heart to respond to “He comes to judge” with the joy the psalmist intends — not “I hope I’m ready” but “Finally. Come, Lord Jesus.”

4. Bring your body into your worship. (*Will/behavior*) Verses 4–6 are strikingly physical: shout joyfully, burst forth, sing praise, play the harp, blow the trumpets, sound the horn. The psalm is not content with internal disposition — it commands embodied, audible, instrumental, *loud* praise. This is not incidental flavor but theological content: a salvation this total, this marvelous, this cosmic demands a response that engages the whole person. If your worship is consistently quiet, passive, and self-contained — if you are the person at the concert who does not move — ask whether your body is being permitted to confess what your theology claims. Sing out loud. Lift your voice. Let your posture confess the victory the LORD has won.

5. Let the covenant faithfulness of God (*hesed*) become your emotional anchor in seasons of waiting. (*Affections/worship*) Verse 3 grounds the entire song in this: “He has remembered His love and His faithfulness to Israel.” The new song does not arise from present circumstances looking favorable — it arises from the remembered faithfulness of a covenant-keeping God. Israel sang this song having passed through exile, suffering, and long seasons of divine hiddenness. They sang because the LORD’s *hesed* had proved unbreakable. When your circumstances argue against praise — when the new song feels unnatural because your life is not singing — return to the ledger of God’s covenant faithfulness. The salvation already accomplished at the cross is the anchor. The Judge is already the Righteous One. The *hesed* has already been proved. Sing from that, not from your present emotional weather.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 98 makes an irreducibly high claim about the nature of God’s salvation: it is *historical* (grounded in specific covenant acts), *public* (witnessed by the nations and the whole creation), *covenantal* (flowing from *hesed* and *emet*, not arbitrary grace), and *eschatological* (pressing toward a final righteous judgment). The psalm holds these four dimensions together without collapsing any into the others. God is revealed here not as a private benefactor dispensing individual blessings but as the victorious King whose arm has won a cosmic battle, whose righteousness is on public display before all nations, and whose coming to judge is the final act of a salvation-history that began with covenant promise. The “marvelous things” of verse 1 are not merely impressive — they are categorically without human parallel, executed by the LORD’s own right hand apart from human aid.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 98 is a compact exhibition of the Reformed understanding of salvation as God’s sovereign, unilateral, covenant-fulfilling act on behalf of His people. The repeated emphasis that *His* right hand and *His* holy arm have worked the victory (v. 1) — with no mention of human cooperation or merit — is native Reformed theology in the Psalter’s own voice. The psalm grounds praise in *hesed* — the covenant love that is prior to and independent of Israel’s faithfulness — making gratitude the only possible response, not boasting. The eschatological horizon (vv. 7–9) demonstrates that redemption is not merely about individual souls but about the restoration of the entire created order under the righteous reign of the King — a thoroughly Reformed scope for the gospel that resists both the individualism that truncates salvation and the social-gospel reduction that evacuates its vertical dimension. The “new song” motif, taken up by Revelation 5, becomes in Reformed canonical reading the choir of the redeemed singing to the Lamb — the fulfillment of every covenant deliverance that came before.

Main Takeaway

God has done something so marvelous — so publicly, so covenantally, so decisively — that the only appropriate response from every human being, every nation, and every corner of creation is a new, erupting, full-throated song of praise. You are not merely invited into that song. You are summoned. The Judge is coming, and He is righteous, and the cosmos is already beginning to clap. Stop singing yesterday’s song from a half-filled lung. The LORD has won. Sing like it.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating “new song” as a worship-style argument.** This is perhaps the most common misuse of Psalm 98 in contemporary preaching — invoking “sing a new song” as a justification for contemporary worship music or, conversely, for a particular liturgical style. The text has nothing to do with musical style and everything to do with theological freshness. A new song is a song that has been renewed at the source — by fresh encounter with God’s saving acts. Preachers who use verse 1 to adjudicate worship wars have not read the verse.
- **Separating the “why” (vv. 1–3) from the “how” (vv. 4–6) from the “who” (vv. 7–9).** The psalm’s three movements build on each other and must not be treated as three independent commands. The global and cosmic scope of the summons (vv. 4–9) is only intelligible as a response to the global and cosmic scope of the salvation (vv. 1–3). Preaching only the “be joyful” section without grounding it in the “because He has done marvelous things” section produces enthusiasm without content — the kind of worshipful noise the psalm is not actually commanding.

- **Reading “He comes to judge” as a warning rather than as praise.** As noted in the Interpretive Evaluation, the psalm presents judgment as the climactic reason for cosmic joy (v. 9: “let them sing before the LORD, *for* He comes to judge”). A preacher who pivots at verse 9 to “but are you ready for the judgment?” has misread the text’s emotional and theological register. The coming judgment is gospel for the people of the covenant. Preachers must proclaim it as such, while ensuring the congregation understands *why* the righteous judgment is good news — which requires the cross to be in view.
- **Losing the covenant-history specificity in favor of generalized praise.** Verse 3 anchors the entire psalm in *hesed* and *emet* — covenant categories specific to Israel’s relationship with the LORD, now fulfilled in Christ. A sermon that reduces Psalm 98 to “God is great and we should praise Him” has evacuated the psalm’s actual load-bearing structure. The marvelous things are specific. The love remembered is covenantal. The arm that worked the victory is the same arm Isaiah 53:1 says was revealed in the Servant. Ground the praise in the specific acts of God, or you are preaching a motivation the psalm does not actually supply.
- **Ignoring the New Testament’s explicit use of this psalm’s imagery.** Revelation 5 and 14 deploy the “new song” motif with explicit Christological content. A preacher who treats Psalm 98 as Old Testament material without Christological fulfillment has left the canonical argument incomplete. The new song the cosmos will sing is not a generic divine-praise song — it is the song of the Lamb. This must be stated, or the psalm’s own forward thrust toward the coming King is orphaned from its fulfillment.
- **Underestimating the embodied praise commands (vv. 4–6) as mere cultural color.** Reformed preaching’s instinct toward order and reverence sometimes treats the psalm’s loud, physical, instrument-laden praise as ancient Near Eastern cultural packaging that the modern congregation does not need to unpack. This is an error. The text commands bodily, audible, exuberant praise. The theological reason is proportionality: the victory is total; the praise should be total. Preachers should not sanitize the psalm’s physicality — they should help the congregation understand *why* such praise is fitting for such a salvation.