

## Psalm 97: The God Who Dispels our Doubt

Everyone fails somewhere in life. Everyone, however successful on however many fronts, nevertheless fails somewhere. Therefore I too am a failure. Specifically, I am a failed agnostic. I wanted to be an agnostic, even tried to be an agnostic, but I didn't succeed. Here's what happened.

I had been aware of a vocation to the ministry, nothing less than a commission from the hand of Jesus Christ, since I was 14 years old. My vocation irked me, however, since I didn't want to be a minister; I wanted to be a lawyer. When I began university, I enrolled in courses that would prepare me for law school. Along the way I majored in philosophy, and did so very well in it that I gave up my dream of being a lawyer in favour of becoming a philosophy professor.

Yet my vocation to the ministry nagged me. No one likes to be nagged. And so I decided to will myself into agnosticism (not hard to do in a philosophy programme, I assumed). After all, God would never call an agnostic to the ministry, would he? Surely an agnostic is of no use to God in the ministry. All around me, in university classes, young Christians were struggling to retain faith. I was struggling to jettison it. I was determined to be an agnostic.

But I couldn't get there. I failed. The One who abandons nobody; the One who said to Jeremiah, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you"—this One hounded me and haunted me. Little by little I had to give up my pursuit of agnosticism.

And then in a fourth-year philosophy course a bomb fell on me. I had to speak with one of my professors about an essay I was to write. I went to his office. This time he wasn't standing formally behind a lectern in front of a class. Instead he was sitting casually with his feet on his desk, chair tipped back, glasses on his forehead. He was much warmer than he appeared in class, and we chatted about my essay topic for three or four minutes.

Prof. Emil Fackenheim, the brightest star in U of T's 85-philosopher firmament; Fackenheim, a Jew who had survived Sachsenhausen (30 kms outside Berlin) where 6000 men were reduced to 300 in a Nazi horror beyond telling; Fackenheim, not only philosopher but rabbi (I didn't know this at

the time), took a cigar out his shirt pocket, lit it, exhaled smoke like the incense that had overwhelmed Isaiah in the temple centuries earlier; Fackenheim barked, “Shepherd, enough about philosophy; let’s talk about **God**.” And for reasons I’ll never grasp, when he said “God”, the room ignited. I was overwhelmed with the shekinah (the perceptible presence of God’s glory); it seemed I was on Sinai with Moses or on Carmel with Elijah.

“Shepherd,” Fackenheim continued after another noxious exhalation, “modernity thinks God to be vague, abstract, ethereal, ‘iffy.’ God, however, is concrete, solid, dense beyond our imagining. There is nothing ‘iffy’ about God; but there is a great deal that is ‘iffy’ about you and me.”

Dumbfounded at the spiritual assault (albeit benign) from a world-class philosopher, I was still reeling when he launched the next salvo: “Shepherd, in view of the horrific depredations of our century—crowned by the Shoah—there are huge question marks above humankind. But concerning God there is no question whatever. Never forget,” he concluded, “We do not demythologize God; God demythologizes us as God exposes the lethal, groundless myths by which we mesmerize ourselves and on account of which we slay each other.”

My encounter with a world-class philosopher exposed my attempted agnosticism as ridiculous, stupid, juvenile fatuity.

God is dense beyond our imagining? God is weightier than we can imagine? What’s the densest substance you can think of? Lead? Lead isn’t very dense at all. The flaming hydrogen gas that constitutes the sun is far denser; one milk-jug of the sun’s flaming hydrogen gas weighs 400 pounds.

The densest substance I know? A neutron star. The matter comprising a neutron star is so very dense that one thimbleful of it vastly outweighs the earth’s total human population. One teaspoon of it weighs one billion tons.

Then how dense is God? Do you understand now that when God leans on a Hebrew prophet, the prophet cannot doubt him? – that the prophet’s only concern is how to survive?

I: -- “The Lord reigns”, exults the psalmist. The God we’ve just spoken of is operative; not remote, not disengaged, not indifferent; this God is present to us and alive among us and forever at work within us; this God is operative at all times, in all places, amidst all circumstances.

“Let the many coastlands be glad”, continues the psalmist. “Coastlands” is a Hebrew expression for the farthest outposts of humankind; “coastlands” means the entire inhabited world, all women and men everywhere. There is no one and nothing that escapes the rulership of God. “The Lord reigns.”

Now in a different sense Queen Elizabeth reigns. Elizabeth reigns, but she doesn’t rule. She doesn’t govern. The queen is a figurehead; she is a carryover from a bygone era; her sovereign effectiveness (beyond sentimentality) is zero. The queen may reign, but the British government rules.

When the psalmist cries “The Lord **reigns**”, on the other hand, he means that the living God **rules**, rules effectually. The One who reigns isn’t a figurehead; he’s nothing symbolic. His reign is his rule; he reigns effectually, and reigns regardless of what overtakes his creation and contradicts him.

Think of the coronavirus. For the past several months the coronavirus has been on everyone’s mind. The newscasts expatiate on it every day. To be sure, the coronavirus is no small matter. But we are mistaken if we think it is the first such pestilence to overtake us.

I grew up when polio was no minor threat, and everyday we were warned about the disease and the horror of having to live immobilized in an iron lung. In 1918, just when World War I ended and the western world anticipated relief, Spanish flu appeared: it killed between 50 and 100 million people. A century earlier tuberculosis took down millions. Before that smallpox was a scourge.

Our mediaeval foreparents had to contend with bubonic plague. Bubonic plague, the black death, surfaced in Europe in 1347, and it quickly devoured 50% of Europe’s people. “Old stuff”, we say; “bubonic plague is gone forever.” Wrong! The deadliest outbreak of bubonic plague in modern times occurred in Madagascar in October 2017. It infected thousands and killed 170.

II: -- The psalmist (who wrote his priceless encouragement 3000 years ago) faced everything we must confront; he encountered everything we can't avoid; he had to contend with everything that upsets us. And still his **experience** of God was so very rich that he could shout, "Clouds and thick darkness are round about him."

The cloud is the Hebrew symbol for God's majestic presence; God's presence that is grand yet inherently attractive; God's presence that is imposing yet resplendent. When we speak of clouds, we usually have something negative in mind: "It's such a cloudy day again; I wish the sun would shine; I'm tired of dirty grey clouds." But when the Hebrew thinker speaks of clouds, he has in mind the hugest, whitest, grandest clouds (the sort, by the way, I see on Prince Edward Island.) Such a cloud, for the Hebrew mind, symbolizes the presence and loftiness and grandeur and towering transcendence of God.

Then what about "thick darkness"? Let me say in passing that 'darkness' and 'thick darkness' are entirely different and translate two different Hebrew words. 'Darkness' refers to evil. 'Thick darkness' is the Hebrew expression for God's solidity, density, opacity. 'Thick darkness' is the Hebrew expression for God's **thickness**; thicker, denser, weightier than a neutron star. "Thick darkness" means that God cannot be dislodged, cannot be set aside, yet also cannot be domesticated.

So this God reigns. To what end? What does his rule accomplish? The psalmist tells us that "righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne." "Righteousness and justice" is Hebrew shorthand for shalom; God's restoration of a disordered, evil-afflicted cosmos; and God's salvation of a dysfunctional, sin-ridden people. Right now the entire creation, marred by evil, lacks wholeness; right now the human creature, marred by sin, lacks holiness. What's more, the disordered creation and dysfunctional sinners interpenetrate each other. While neither is the cause of the other's problem, both torment each other. A disordered creation that finds people lacking the

necessities of life lends them an added inducement to sin (as if they needed added inducement); on the other hand, sinners who are self-preoccupied care little for a creation they are polluting and degrading every day. God's purpose is to remedy both. He is intent on a **world** in which righteousness dwells; and he pursues a **people** who will praise him everlastingly as only rescued sinners can.

Will God achieve his purpose? Or is he going to be stymied, frustrated finally? Using yet another vivid image, the Psalmist reminds us, "Fire goes before him, and burns up his adversaries round about....The mountains melt like wax before the Lord, before the Lord of **all** the earth."

Now please don't say, "Just a minute, Shepherd. God is **thick darkness**; God is also **consuming fire** that overcomes his adversaries. How can God be dark and fiery at the same time? Doesn't fire shed light and thereby eliminate what's dark?" If you ask this question you are asking the wrong question. Concerning these wonderfully vivid images of God's presence and power we are to think **not literally but literarily**. Of course God isn't literally fire, flaming methane gas. Of course God isn't literally a cloud, water droplets suspended in air. We aren't to think literally but literarily.

It all adds up to one thing: God is bigger, grander, denser, more substantive, more effective, than anything we could guess at apart from the God-ordained images the psalmist gives us.

III: -- The truth that God's commitment to the restoration of the creation and those creatures made in his image; the truth that God's commitment to this end and God's zeal in pursuing it; the truth that God's adversary-consuming intensity is hot enough and intense enough to have mountains melt like wax; none of this means that we, God's people are to do nothing. God has called us into his Kingdom; God has recruited his people to join him in his pursuit. For this reason the psalmist declares, "O you who love the Lord, hate evil!"

I am always startled at the juxtaposition: those who love are simultaneously to hate; those who love God are to hate evil. Love and hatred are passions. Plainly God expects his people to be

impassioned, as impassioned as he is. What's more, he expects his impassioned people to be more than impassioned; he expects them to act. The apostle James insists it isn't enough to be an enthusiastic hearer of the Word; we must no less be an ardent doer of the Word. Jesus Christ challenges misguided disciples, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord', and not **do** what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46) We are to hate evil.

Now the last thing I want to do this morning is to foster false guilt in anyone, make anyone feel inadequate or deficient in that she isn't zealous enough, discerning enough, resolute enough, brave enough in her active hatred of evil. False guilt doesn't help anyone.

Neither do I want to deny that more than a little discretion is needed before we hurl ourselves against evil, even the most blatant evil. I am always aware that many a person has recognized an evil to be just that, has determined to roll it back, only to find himself overtaken by, victimized by, the very evil he thought he was called to undo.

A friend told me he had a vocation to work on behalf of the women wretchedly immersed in the sex-trade, now proliferating everywhere.

Now I had had several opportunities to observe close-up this man's dysfunctional marriage. I knew that his dysfunctional marriage rendered him vulnerable in an area where his vulnerability would likely collapse him and leave him disgraced. As gently as I could I said to him, "The evil you want to roll back; it is evil and it should be rolled back; but it isn't your task to do this. You identify a different evil to hate."

While we are on this topic we should admit that there is much evil we can do nothing about. If someone tells me that there is corruption in the way government funds are assigned to some researchers (but not to others, equally deserving); if someone tells me there is corruption in the tow-truck industry (this point is beyond dispute), I'm not doubting it, denying it, or minimizing its seriousness. But neither is there anything I can do immediately about it. I have no access to the tow-truck industry; I have no access to the assigning of government funds to researchers. I don't

have a ready-to-hand tool to use against such corruption.

Then were do we begin? Instead of beginning with massive evil or dramatic evil, let's begin at the other end. Let's begin with something closer to home, something personal, something to which we **do** have access and about which we **can** do something.

Let's look at the book of Proverbs. The author of Proverbs exclaims, "There are six things which the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to him." (Prov. 6:16-19) Then he lists them.

The first is "haughty eyes." The Lord hates haughty eyes. Haughty eyes are the murderous facial expression of the disdainful person, the contemptuous person. Haughty eyes are the bodily expression, the dismissive wave of the hand, the sarcastic smile, the derisive write-off of the person now written-off as not worth bothering with, not even considered to exist.

In Matthew 5:12 Jesus says, "Whoever insults her sister mobilizes God's prosecution; and whoever gives his brother the finger is on the brink of hell."

People who are adept at verbal or bodily putdowns are proud of what they do and protective of themselves (they think) at the same time. Even as they slay those they deem beneath them they remark, "Did I say anything?" Of course they haven't said anything. There's no need to speak when facial expression kills more quickly.

Haven't we all seen someone publicly humiliated by a false smile? Wretchedly embarrassed by a snort of superiority? Haven't we all seen someone shamed publicly and reduced to helpless, voiceless anguish by the smart aleck's smirk? Haven't we all seen someone shrivelled by a belittlement she will never forget?

"Did I say anything?" Haughty eyes, says our Hebrew friend, is an evil no less evil than the tuberculosis bacillus or the cancer cell or the corona virus. The Lord hates evil. We must hate evil. If we can't do anything about evil in Putin's Russia, we can surely do something closer to home.

Next, says the book of Proverbs, is "a lying tongue." In Matthew 5:37 Jesus says, "Let what you

say be simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’. Anything more than this comes from evil.” Christ’s pronouncement is repeated five times in the New Testament. It’s plain that transparent speech, devoid of deviousness or dissimulation, must be found in Christ’s people. Christians are to be characterized by unadorned, unambiguous speech. We mean what we say and say what we mean. We don’t traffic in that subtly disguised doublespeak wherein we can say something caustic and then deny it credibly when we are faulted for it.

We have all met those who are adept at ambiguous speech. They know how to say something that publicly allows them maximal wiggle room, even as they know the hearer will hear something that suggests no wiggle room at all. They laugh at how clever they are. They dismiss Christ’s command concerning ‘yes’ and ‘no’. They dismiss the apostle James: “Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ ‘no’, so that you may not fall under condemnation.” (James 5:12)

When John Wesley was putting together the earliest Methodist classes, he wrote in 1743 that Methodists must never be found “using many words in buying or selling.” Using many words in buying or selling simply means the speaker is bent on making a sucker out of the person he’s doing business with. It appears some Methodists didn’t get Wesley’s point, because one year later, 1744, he wrote that Methodists must always “be at **a** word [**one** word – only] in buying or selling.”

If we are not truthful, not transparent, then we shouldn’t expect people to trust us. Why would anyone trust those who display themselves as untrustworthy?

If we love the Lord, says the psalmist, we must simultaneously hate evil.

“Six things the Lord hates; seven are an abomination to him”, says Proverbs. Today we have looked at only two. The remaining five we shall leave for another day, even as we are invited to search our hearts and honestly confront ourselves with the as-yet un-named evil within us that we are to repent and repudiate.



IV: -- Finally, Psalm 97 tells us, at the end of the day, we are summoned to rejoice in the Lord and give thanks to his holy name. In Hebrew, ‘name’ means nature, person, presence, power, deserved reputation. As God acts in history God **names** himself. In the calling of Abraham and Sarah for the sake of a people who live to the praise of his glory; in the summoning of Moses to lead a people into a promised land that would one day be nothing less than the Kingdom of God; in the calling of prophets who re-acquainted God’s people with God’s uncompromisable truth and God’s undeflectable purpose—in all of this God **named** himself repeatedly, ever revealing his nature, his person, his presence, his power and his reputation.

And then he **named himself definitively in his Son**. At the Jordan and again at the Transfiguration God said concerning Jesus of Nazareth, “You are my Son; you are the One the whole inhabited earth is to hear and heed; you are the One who bears my Spirit for the sake of bestowing it upon my people.”

The apostle Paul reminds the congregation in Ephesus that God has named himself forever in the name “that is above every name”, the name of Jesus Christ. For Christ Jesus our Lord has pioneered for us that way through life which honours God. Jesus Christ has borne our sin and borne it away leaving us the freedom to follow him, our elder brother, in our lives as children of God. Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead; God has thereby vindicated his Son, and vindicated his people with him, allowing us his people to stand with him cheerfully amidst those who still mock him and scorn his people.

Just because God has named himself victoriously in the name of him whose name is above every name we can rejoice; we must rejoice. For the God who is brightest cloud, thickest darkness and consuming fire all at once; this One has defined himself for us in Jesus Christ, now guarantees the fulfilment of his purpose for us and our world, and holds us close to him in a grip that will never let us go.

Every day I thank God I’m a failure; a failed agnostic, that is. *Victor Shepherd 9th August 2020 S.U.C.*

## Psalm 97 English Standard Version

## The LORD Reigns

- 97** The LORD reigns, let the earth rejoice;  
let the many coastlands be glad!
- <sup>2</sup>Clouds and thick darkness are all around him;  
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.
- <sup>3</sup>Fire goes before him  
and burns up his adversaries all around.
- <sup>4</sup>His lightnings light up the world;  
the earth sees and trembles.
- <sup>5</sup>The mountains melt like wax before the LORD,  
before the Lord of all the earth.
- <sup>6</sup>The heavens proclaim his righteousness,  
and all the peoples see his glory.
- <sup>7</sup>All worshipers of images are put to shame,  
who make their boast in worthless idols;  
worship him, all you gods!
- <sup>8</sup>Zion hears and is glad,  
and the daughters of Judah rejoice,  
because of your judgments, O LORD.
- <sup>9</sup>For you, O LORD, are most high over all the earth;  
you are exalted far above all gods.
- <sup>10</sup>O you who love the LORD, hate evil!  
He preserves the lives of his saints;  
he delivers them from the hand of the wicked.
- <sup>11</sup>Light is sown for the righteous,  
and joy for the upright in heart.
- <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in the LORD, O you righteous,  
and give thanks to his holy name!