

Whose victory? (Psalm 98)

People want to be champions. Psalm 98 offers something different.

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In 2010, DJ Khaled's "All I Do Is Win" became an anthem, echoing in arenas worldwide. You've probably already heard it this football season. We love victory songs, especially when they celebrate overcoming opponents. But our cultural sense of victory can ring shallow and violent—as in sports, where we talk about "crushing" competitors. Human victory songs—whether in stadiums or on battlefields—testify to domination and annihilation. There can only be one champion, and everyone else is a loser.

Psalm 98 offers something different. The psalmist sings not of personal triumph but of *God's* victory. Crucially, Israel's foes remain unnamed. Instead, God's victory becomes an invitation for the whole earth—seas, floods, hills—to join the praise. All this celebration, however, remains penultimate. The psalm's climax declares that God comes to judge with righteousness and equity.

If we fail to hold the psalm's end from its beginning, we conclude prematurely that God's victory resembles human conquest. But God's victory is not the end but the means for establishing righteous judgment and equitable action. God's right hand and holy arm crush injustice, not necessarily people. This represents victory over unjust power itself, not just enemies.

When praise aims at God's equity rather than dominance, we recognize what is most powerful about God: not who gets crushed but who gets lifted, and how that lifting doesn't require crushing others. The psalm celebrates victory without demonizing opponents, suggesting the real enemy is injustice itself.

Sometimes, the righteous agency of an oppressed people manifests as a reminder to themselves and the world that their oppressors are not God, nor their violence a reflection of God's justice-making. This psalm functions as ideological resistance—praise becomes a way of delegitimizing unjust power by pointing to a different authority altogether.

We shortchange our faith when we sing only one-sidedly of victory. Some 20 years before DJ Khaled, following the witness of Ella Baker, Bernice Johnson Reagon and Sweet Honey in the Rock taught us to sing: "We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes." This too is a hymn of praise and prophetic victory—singing until God's justice and equity reign.

God's victory promises justice and righteousness; that is the new song our world desperately needs. When we sing knowing God's victory means God's justice, our praise becomes prophetic witness to power that creates rather than destroys, that establishes equity rather than domination.