

**Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia,  
by Dr. David Fischler, on Sunday, September 6, 2015**

## **THE GREAT AND SOVEREIGN KING**

### **Psalm 47:1-9**

One hundred and one years ago, the greatest conflict in the history of humanity began with the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand in Serbia. With that all of Europe and much of the world beyond was plunged into war. On the one side were what was called the *Triple Entente*, the alliance of the German Empire, the Austria-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. On the other side was the *Triple Alliance* consisting of the British and Russian Empires and the Republic of France. The alliance later gained the help of the Kingdom of Italy, as well as the United States of America. The entente later added to its roles the Kingdom of Bulgaria, which as you can imagine didn't make all that much difference. Those nine countries were joined by others. In the end nations that declared war came from every continent that was inhabited by human beings.

The countries that engaged in that war were called *The Great Powers*. Germany, Britain, Austria, France, Russia. They were the giants of the earth. Their rulers – Kaiser Wilhelm, Czar Nicholas and the others, were the mighty men of the world, no matter what the powers were that they actually had to govern. As you all know the Emperor of the British Empire, the King of Britain, didn't have all that much power even then. But they were looked to as symbols of their great power nations and as such they were exalted among their peoples and in some instances even beyond. Those great powers, by and large, with the exception of Turkey, had one thing in common. They were all predominantly Christian countries. That's a blot of shame on the Christian Church that lies on it to this day. But the amazing thing is that in the rush for war and in the rush of the churches to support their various governments on both sides of the conflict, no one seemed to stop and say, "Wait a minute. These are not great powers. These are the squabbling divisions of humanity that have forgotten what binds them together. They are all under the sovereignty of *the* Great King, who is God alone." Perhaps if that banner had been raised in August and September of 1914 things might have been a little different. But they weren't. And even today, nations war against nations. Far more than just Christians are involved, though we continue to be. And there is still talk of the *powers* of the earth. The United States is sometimes referred to as a super power, and one of the things that we most want to do is to prevent the Chinese from becoming a super power. The Russians, when they were the Soviets, were a super power, but they're not anymore. They've lost a lot of their empire, but they'd like to be a super power again.

So, just as a hundred and one years ago, we repeat the same mistake and we forget Who's actually in charge of the world. But this is not a modern mistake. In days of old there were great powers as well. They went by names like Egypt and Assyria, Babylonia and Persia, Greece and Rome. Those were great powers that existed during the time of the writing of the Old Testament and the New Testament. And they, despite their power, were as modern Germany or America or Russia or China or Britain. They, too, were but

the puny divisions of humanity, squabbling over land, squabbling over riches, squabbling over power. And always forgetting that they, in fact, were not the great kings that they thought they were.

Psalm 47 reminds us anew of this truth. And it begins, in verse 1, with the declaration that the nations of the world, “all you nations,” not just Israel, but all of the nations of the world – you Egyptian Pharaohs, you Babylonian kings, you Persian satraps, you Roman governors, you Greek emperors – clap your hands and shout, not to your kings and not to the idols that you’ve made for yourselves – shout to God with cries of joy. Realize what the actual state of the world is, that you’re not in charge, even though you might think you are. Come to Him, we’re told in verse 2, because He’s awesome. “How awesome is the LORD Most High.” Another way to put this is to say that He is to be feared. You could bet that Alexander and Julius Caesar and Cyrus the Great and Ramses the Twelfth didn’t think that they had anyone to fear. They thought that they were on top of the world. But if you remember one of the places where that phrase “top of the world” originated was in the Jimmy Cagney movie *White Heat* in 1949. He shouted that out just before the tower that he was on top of blew up and killed him. Remember that? The fact is that eventually Cyrus and Ramses and Julius and Alexander were going to blow up. They were all going to die and all their empires were going to die. They have, in fact, something to fear. And that was the One whose hand they sat in the palm of. They were in the palm of the hand of the Lord Most High. Awesome and to be feared. To be feared at least in part because He’s beyond our normal experience.

You know the great powers of the earth think in terms of military arms and they think in terms of gold and silver and printing presses. And they think in terms of laws and administrative regulations and power over people. But the God who is over them is beyond that. Beyond our conceiving. Powerful beyond anything we can imagine. But also gracious beyond anything that we are capable of imagining. The kings of old and the great powers of the world now like to think of themselves, want to think of themselves, as compassionate, as doing well for their people. Occasionally they’ll demonstrate that by throwing out a tax credit or sparing a condemned prisoner. But the grace of our God goes way beyond anything that any earthly king can bestow. It goes even to eternal life. I suspect that one of the reasons why we have such a hard time with the hard stories of the Old Testament is because we react to them in human terms rather than recognizing that behind them lies One whom we have an impossible time fully conceiving.

So think of the stories that people will throw at you to try to demonstrate that the Old Testament is full of immorality. The order from God to Saul to slaughter the Amalekites. Or the vow that Jephthah makes that the next person out of his tent should be slain and it turns out to be his daughter. And he swore that with an oath before God and so God does what he’s sworn. Those kind of stories are hard and I know they provoke head-scratching, they provoke outrage on the part of the world, they provoke head-scratching on the part of God’s people. How could our God do that sort of thing? And I’d like to suggest that at least part of the reason He is able to do that is because His standards are not always our standards. His calling is for us to bring our standards of what is right and

wrong, our standards of justice and love and the way that they interact with one another, into harmony with His. But given our limited nature, even those of us among the redeemed, find it difficult, if not impossible, to do that, at least in its entirety. And so, we're told that the kings, the nations, should come to God and cry with joy because He is the Great King over all the earth. The title *Great King* had a very specific meaning in those days. When one wanted to indicate to one's neighbors, kind of like the way a peacock throws out its chest and unfurls its feathers in order to send a message to other peacocks, in the same way the kings of the earth in those days would style themselves *The Great King* because they were the one whom all others should bow down before. And so for instance, you would have a king in Israel in Jesus' day, a Herod. And he'd call himself king, but he would never call himself the great king, because if he called himself the great king it would be his way of saying that he was above even Caesar, and we all know what would happen at that point. So when the psalmist says that He's the Great King over all the earth, that's his way of saying without question that even the princes of the world would understand, "This is the One to whom *you* bow."

We know that He's the Great King because of His mighty deeds, and you see those in verses 3 and 4. "He subdued nations under us," the sons of Korah write, "peoples under our feet. He chose our inheritance for us, the pride of Jacob, whom He loved." He defeated nations who stood against Israel in the conquest of Canaan. And He gave a land to a people whom He chose out of nothing more than grace, and whom He loves despite their sin. As you read the history of Old Testament Israel, you can look at it solely through the eyes of what Henry Kissinger called *real politique*. And you can see the way that Israel related to Egypt and to Babylonia and to the smaller peoples, the Amalekites and the Edomites and the Jebusites and the Canaanites and all the other peoples around them. You can look at it in those terms, but the truth of the matter is that the nomadic people who wandered into Egypt and found themselves enslaved for 400 years had no more reason to think that they would ever rule over a land, that they would ever be independent of the powers of the earth than does a youth gang in Brooklyn.

The people of Israel were small. And by small that doesn't necessarily mean that they were numerically the littlest among all the tribes of the earth, but they were powerless. They were nothing. And yet the psalm tells us nations were subdued under them. The people of the land that God had given them fought against them, yes, but they couldn't triumph because the God who is sovereign over all the peoples and all the rulers of the earth was with Israel. "He chose our inheritance for us," the reference to the land, but we might just as well read that as saying He chose them. But He didn't choose them because they were powerful or because of what they could do for Him. He chose them simply out of His sovereign choice, in a way that absolutely befuddles the world. The world doesn't get that. The world doesn't understand. If you ever want to know why it is that there is so much anti-Semitism in the world, this is the reason. The world cannot understand why God would choose this pathetic, homeless, powerless, inconsequential people to be His. The world thinks that when Israel proclaims itself chosen, it's holding itself up and saying, "Aren't we wonderful?" But it's not. It's proclaiming the grace of God in choosing them rather than the powerful, the mighty, the wealthy of the world. And the world is baffled by that because the world doesn't operate on that basis. The world tells

us that the favored are those who are rich, those who hold political office, those who have their own reality TV show. These are the favorites of the world. I don't know about you, but I've never seen *Jersey Shore*. But the idea that that's the chosen of the world? I don't get that at all. But that's the way the world looks at it. These are the people about whom others are talking. But that's not the way that God operates.

In the second part of the Psalm, verses 5-7, we're told that as the King and as God, He's worthy of praise. "God has ascended amid shouts of joy, the LORD amid the sounding of trumpets." The references to His ascension and to trumpets are both suggestive of victory in battles. Ascension translates a verb that has primarily to do with God joining the war. It has to do with a commanding general or, in those days, more likely the king or the emperor coming onto the field of battle, leading his troops in battle, winning the victory. Not only by his great strategy but also by his own heroic deeds. And then proclaiming that victory.

The trumpet – *shofar* – refers to what's used to summon the troops to battle. So what the psalmist is saying here is that God has and will win the battle over everything that comes against His people, whether worldly or the powers of darkness. And that He deserves praise for that. Verse 6 says, "Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises to our King, sing praises." Sing praises for He has triumphed over the enemies of His people and that victory is won, we know, preeminently, in Christ. In the psalmist's day perhaps they would have thought of that primarily in worldly terms. "We have won the victory over the Amorites and so the kingdom stands and God has fought our battle for us." And that's true, but it was fleeting, as are all the victories that we win in this world. The true victory, the final victory, the ultimate victory, was won in Christ at the Cross.

This Psalm, 47, can be looked at as a prophetic psalm even though it's not very specific, not specific enough to say, "Well, it's talking about the Cross or it's talking about the Incarnation." But in a way it's prophetic, because it proclaims God's victory. And we know that's a final victory, a complete victory, a victory that will be completed on the final day. And that victory is possible because He is king over *all* the earth. Verse 7 says God is King, not just of North America, not just of Israel or Western Asia, not just of Europe. God is King of all the earth. He's no tribal god. He's not a god of the battle against the Egyptians and the Persians. He's no nature god. He's not a god of trees or bushes or sky or lightning. He's the universal God. Ruler of everything. And for that we sing to Him a psalm of praise. Not because He needs our praise, but because it's our way of acknowledging He is who He is and that we are thankful.

In the last day Paul says in Philippians 2, at the end every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. And some of those tongues and some of those knees are not going to be happy about it. Sad to say. We wish that it were not so, but we know that it will be. Some will not be happy about that. But they *will* acknowledge it. We, on the other hand, sing praise, not simply to acknowledge a fact or to recognize a truth. We sing praise because our response to that truth is "Thank You, Lord! Thank You that You are in charge. Thank You that You are in control. And thank You that in Your grace You have made me Yours."

In the last part of the Psalm, verses 8-9, “all the earth will acknowledge His kingship.” Philippians 2 says that explicitly. This says that explicitly as well, even without the reference to Christ. “God reigns over the nations.” Not just over Israel. Even in these days, when He was so frequently referred to in the Old Testament as the God of Israel, He was referred to as the God of Israel because that was the people He had chosen, and because that was the people that worshipped and at least tried, however unsuccessfully, to obey Him. All the nations, however, even in those days, were His. In the time of the writing of this Psalm He was every bit as much the God of Babylonia and the God of Egypt and the God of Assyria, as He was the God of Israel. Even as today He is every bit as much the God of the United States of America, and the God of Great Britain, and the God of Germany and of Russia and of China, and of every other nation that does not acknowledge Him.

We are frequently told, and from a human standpoint it may be true, that we live in the United States of America in a *secular republic*. I’m willing to go along with that fiction for the sake of civil peace and carrying out of the American Constitution. That’s all fine and good. But the truth is, even as we proclaim ourselves a secular republic we are in fact under the Kingship of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and of Jesus Christ. And nothing – no Supreme Court proclamation, no presidential executive order, no law of congress – will ever change that. Ever. It doesn’t mean that all will go the way we want it to, but in the end, even presidents and Supreme Court justices and congressmen and governors, even those who are so intent on saying, “We’re in charge,” will find out that all along they really weren’t. The nobles of the nations assemble. They’re brought together as the people of the God of Abraham. It’s a striking expression, because at that time such was not the case. This truly does look forward to the Messianic era when peoples of all nations, including in some instances their rulers, will see that the God of Abraham is indeed the God of all the world. And that in Jesus Christ all of the things that have separated us through the centuries – language, tribe, clan – all of that stuff will simply be recognized for what it is. Inconsequential. They are all His and He will have them. The kings of the earth belong to God. He will have them, for there is no force in the universe, not even Satan himself, who can make that anything other than what it is, which is that they belong to Him.

All people will exalt Him on the day when His triumph is made complete. That day is not yet. May we pray that it will be soon.