

## Week 5. Book 4 (Psalms 90–106): Who reigns now?

Before we open Psalms 91 and 97, do you have comments or questions on our journey through the Psalms so far?

### What's in Book 4?

Book 3 ended in tragedy. The reign of *the LORD and his anointed* (Psalm 2:2) was over. God had *rejected* his anointed (Psalm 89:38).

Book 4 acknowledges the disaster, but it's not the end. It is a setback, taking them back centuries to the time before David was appointed as the shepherd of God's people. All that's gone, so Psalm 90 takes us back to the "shepherd" who led God's flock out of Egypt (Exodus 3:1). That shepherd (Moses) is still praying for them. No other psalm is attributed to Moses. Psalm 2 has crumbled (God's reign through his anointed), but Psalm 1 still stands (the Law of the LORD). They're still God's people on the basis of the Sinai covenant.

The LORD was Israel's king long before David (Judges 8:23; 1 Samuel 8:7). The LORD is still king, even when David is not. That's the revelation of God in Book 4:

- 93:1 *The LORD reigns; he is robed in majesty.*
- 95:3 *The LORD is the great God, the great King above all gods.*
- 96:10 *Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns."*
- 97:1 *The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad.*
- 98:6 *Shout for joy before the LORD, the King.*
- 99:1 *The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble.*

Though the earthly kingdom has fallen, heaven's reign remains: *The LORD has established his throne in heaven, his kingdom rules over all* (103:19).

This revelation transforms Book 4. Where Books 1–3 were full of laments, Book 4 is full of praise. Even while they suffer under foreign rule, recognizing heaven's authority changes everything on earth. The genres in Book 4 are:

- praise (12) Psalms 92-93; 95-100; 103-106
- lament (3) Psalms 90; 94; 102
- royal (1) Psalm 101
- trust (1) Psalm 91

As you'd expect, David is almost absent. Only Psalms 101 and 103 are "Of David."

For reference, the New Testament quotes these psalms from Book 4:

- Psalm 91:11-12 Matthew 4:6 || Luke 4:11
- Psalm 94:11 1 Corinthians 3:20
- Psalm 95 Hebrews 4:7; 3:15; 3:11; 4:3; 4:5
- Psalm 102:25-27 Hebrews 1:12
- Psalm 104:4 Hebrews 1:7

## Psalm 91: Trusting God's protection

Psalm 91 calls God's people to trust their heavenly sovereign's care. They no longer have David to "shield" them (89:18), but they are a people under God, a flock *shepherded* by the LORD as the following Psalms express it (95:7; 100:3).

Psalm 91 trusts God's leadership, God's protection of his people. They will not die out.

There are only six psalms of **trust**. The best known is Psalm 23, trusting our Shepherd. The others are Psalms 11, 16, 62, 63, and this one:

### Psalm 91:1-2 (NIV)

<sup>1</sup> Whoever dwells in the shelter of the Most High  
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.

<sup>2</sup> I will say of the LORD, "He is my refuge and my fortress,  
my God, in whom I trust."

Previous psalms asked why God **hid** himself from them as they went into exile:

- *Why, LORD, do you reject me and **hide** your face from me?"* (88:14)
- *How long, LORD? will you **hide** yourself forever?* (89:46)

Psalm 91 answers their cry. God isn't hiding; God is their **hiding place**. Beth Tanner offers this word-for-word translation of verse 1:

**91:1** One living within the **hiding place** of the Most High,  
in the shadow of the Almighty this one abides.<sup>13</sup>

God's people in exile felt like they'd lost their identity. They felt as if they were hidden in a foreign kingdom, under other powers and other gods. Not so, says Psalm 91. They are the people of the *Most High* (ě̄l·yôn), the *Almighty* (šăd·dăy) who rules over all powers in the heavens and on earth. Even in exile—among foreign rulers with their foreign gods — the Most High/Almighty is their hiding place, the shelter from which they will one day emerge again.



The underground city of Kaymakli, Türkiye. Photo: Allen Browne, 2014.

Protective hiding places were part of the ancient world. In Cappadocia, people began building underground shelters in the seventh century BC. Eventually, Kaymakli became an underground city, several stories deep.

God's people therefore need to trust the LORD, their covenant sovereign (verse 2). What will he save his people from?

### Psalm 91:3-8 (NIV)

<sup>3</sup> Surely he will save you from the fowler's snare  
and from the deadly pestilence.

<sup>13</sup> Beth Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 697.

- <sup>4</sup> He will cover you with his feathers,  
and under his wings you will find refuge;  
his faithfulness will be your shield and rampart.
- <sup>5</sup> You will not fear the terror of night,  
nor the arrow that flies by day,  
<sup>6</sup> nor the pestilence that stalks in the darkness,  
nor the plague that destroys at midday.
- <sup>7</sup> A thousand may fall at your side,  
ten thousand at your right hand,  
but it will not come near you.
- <sup>8</sup> You will only observe with your eyes  
and see the punishment of the wicked.

In the 2020 pandemic, these were among the most popular verses on social media. “The *deadly pestilence* will not touch me,” people declared. “A thousand may fall at my side, ten thousand at my left hand, but it will not come near me!”

What do you think of that use of the Psalm?

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While it is generally true that trouble comes to those who ignore God's wise ways, it isn't like that for every individual. Some of those who died in 2020 were godly people. King Josiah died in battle, even though he was a godly king. When Babylon invaded, thousands fell defending Jerusalem. Anyone who thinks the godly are invincible has not understood the cross. The very context of this Psalm asks for caution in the way we apply it.

Psalm 91 is about trusting God's heart. A *fowler's snare* (verse 3) is a trap for birds, but that's not God's heart. God is a mother hen, calling his people under her wings to protect us (verse 4).

After the exile, the Jewish people began to reframe their understanding of their enemies. Before the exile, the enemy was whoever the king was fighting: Philistines, Arameans, Assyrians, Edomites, or even the northern nation of Israel. But when they became part of the kingdom of Babylon, and then Persia, and then Greece, they realized their enemy wasn't merely whichever human ruler was in power. There had to be an Enemy behind the enemies, a *śā-tān* to use the Hebrew word.

Some of them became preoccupied with these spiritual powers. They began to blame demons for everything that was wrong with the world. They reread Psalm 91 as all about the spiritual powers they feared. The *deadly pestilence* (verses 3 and 6) was an angel of death. The *terror of the night* and the *arrow flying in the daylight* (verse 5) were evil spirits. They developed a whole new form of writing (apocalyptic) in which God defeated the evil spirits and therefore the nations that had been empowered by the evil spirits to defeat God's nation.

Even before the time of Jesus, Psalm 91 had become a favourite among the exorcists. These phrases became incantations for casting out evil spirits.

But Psalm 91 is not about ranting at evil spirits. It's about trusting the LORD for our protection:

**Psalm 91:9-13 (NIV)**

- <sup>9</sup> If you say, "The LORD is my refuge,"  
and you make the Most High your dwelling,  
<sup>10</sup> no harm will overtake you,  
no disaster will come near your tent.  
<sup>11</sup> For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways;  
<sup>12</sup> they will lift you up in their hands,  
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.  
<sup>13</sup> You will tread on the lion and the cobra;  
you will trample the great lion and the serpent.

Maybe the devil heard Psalm 91 more than any other. The *Satan* (the Enemy of God and his people) used this Psalm against God's Anointed:

**Matthew 4:5-6 (NIV)**

- <sup>5</sup> Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.  
<sup>6</sup> "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: " 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" [Psalm 91:11]

Was the devil right? Could Jesus demonstrate his status as God's ruler by jumping off the walls without stubbing his toe?

Or did the devil misquote God—omitting "in all your ways" (Psalm 91:11)? It's not about designing a situation that puts God to the test (Matthew 4:7).



Western Wall of the temple site today. Photo: Allen Browne, 2017.

So, the interesting question for the Christian reader is whether Jesus' life was genuinely in danger, or whether his Father's protection meant he was not vulnerable? What do you think Jesus believed? You may find the answer in Jesus' prayers (Matthew 26:36-47).

In the preceding psalms, God was silent:

- "*Darkness is my closest friend*" they said, as if speaking to a void (88:18).
- "*Where is your former great love?*" they asked. There was no answer (89:49).
- "*Relent, LORD! How long will it be?*" they pleaded. Silence (90:13).

Now, at the end of Psalm 91, God speaks:<sup>14</sup>

**Psalm 91:14-16 (NIV)**

<sup>14</sup> “Because he loves me, I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. <sup>15</sup> He will call on me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him.

<sup>16</sup> With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”

The praying person began, “He is my refuge and fortress, my God, in whom I trust” (verse 2). God responds: “Because he loves me, I will rescue him” (verse 14).

When did God do this? When did God restore his fallen people?

I can't help thinking about Jesus as one in whom the LORD's promise is ultimately fulfilled. Jesus faced the evil enemy for his people. He sank into the death of the kingdom, the death of God's people. He rescued God's deceased nation as God answered his cries and raised him out of death:

**Hebrews 5:7–9 (NIV)**

<sup>7</sup> During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

<sup>8</sup> Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered

<sup>9</sup> and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.

Is this the ultimate response to the promises of Psalm 91?

God did not prevent his Son Jesus being crucified by the nations. God did not prevent his son Israel falling to the nations. God did not prevent the rebellion of the world because that's not how God uses his sovereign authority. But God did rescue his Son from death, re-establishing his reign and saving his world in him.

Psalm 91 is about trusting God to save his people. Read in context, that salvation is so much more than anyone imagined. The Most High—the Almighty who rules heaven and earth—is saving those who place their trust in him. What do you think?

Here's a final wrinkle on Psalm 91. Long after the exile, the Hebrew scriptures translated into Aramaic (Jesus' language). These interpretive translations were called *Targums*. The Targum of Psalm 91 interprets it as David teaching his son about the LORD delivering his people:

**Psalm 91:2-3 (Targum)<sup>15</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> *David said*, “I will say to the LORD, ‘My security and my *strong* fortress, my God!’ I will trust in *his Memra*. <sup>3</sup> For he will deliver you, *Solomon my son*, from the trap *and the snare*.”

So, it seems the Targum understood Psalm 91 messianically too. The Aramaic-speaking Jews hoped that one day the son of David would be raised up to save his people.

<sup>14</sup> The NIV's “says the LORD” is an accurate interpolation, though it's not in the Hebrew.

<sup>15</sup> Kevin Cathcart et al (editors), *The Aramaic Bible: The Targum of Psalms*, translated by David M. Stec, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), Ps 91:2–3.

## Psalm 97: The LORD is king

Recognizing God's reign fills us with exuberant praise:

### Psalm 97:1 (NIV)

The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad;  
let the distant shores rejoice.

The floodgates have now opened, and praise for God is filling the world:

- 92:1 It is good to praise the LORD and make music to your name, O Most High.
- 93:1 The LORD reigns, he is robed in majesty.
- 95:1 Come, let us sing for joy to the LORD.
- 96:1 Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth
- 97:1 The LORD reigns, let the earth be glad.
- 98:1 Sing to the LORD a new song for he has done marvellous things
- 99:1 The LORD reigns, let the nations tremble.
- 100:1 Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth.
- 101:1 I will sing of your love and justice; to you, LORD, I will sing praise.
- 103:1 Praise the LORD, my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name.
- 104:1 Praise the LORD, my soul. LORD my God, you are very great.
- 105:1 Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name.
- 106:1 Praise the LORD. Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.

The first three Books of the Psalms had only 14 praise psalms. Book 1 had only three! We heard plenty about David and his struggles, but little about the LORD as king. What has changed?

Do you remember why they wanted an earthly king in the first place? They said, “*We want a king over us ... to go out before us and **fight our battles**.*” (1 Samuel 8:19-20). And, as you'd expect, **enemies** and foes were the big topic while they focused on David's reign.

Now they focus on the LORD's reign, especially the global scope of God's reign. Israel's demise was no problem for the LORD, since he rules everything anyway.

What is praise? **Praise is our response to His Majesty.**

### ***His majesty (97:1-7)***

How do you picture God when you pray? Many Christians focus on Jesus, because it's in Christ that we see God. But looking for God directly—without the human king—can feel like staring into the dark, like an enigma wrapped in a mystery:

### Psalm 97:2 (NIV)

Clouds and thick darkness surround him;  
righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.

*Clouds and thick darkness*—that's a strange parallel for *righteousness and justice*. Do you recall when Israel first saw God wrapped in a cloud? (Hint: Exodus 13:21-22.)

What was God doing at that time? How did they experience God *doing right* by them? How was God overruling the *injustice* of Pharaoh's claim?

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God led them to Sinai, calling them into a covenant that *established his throne* over them. Like Jesus said: God's Spirit is no more visible than the wind, but we see the effect he has on the world. And the Spirit's impact is God's kingdom, a reborn people (John 3:3, 8).

In the Sinai covenant, God made a way for his people:

**Psalm 97:3-5 (NIV)**

- <sup>3</sup> Fire goes before him  
and consumes his foes on every side.  
<sup>4</sup> His lightning lights 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.

Do you see any of those images in Exodus 19:16-19, when the people met the One who would reign over them now that they were free from Pharaoh?

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*Mountains melting like wax* has an interesting parallel in Micah 1:4. It's like *water rushing down a slope*, eroding the hard earth like a landslide. Our heavenly sovereign knows how to terraform the earth into what he intends it to be. Even the most enduring elements (mountains) are changed by his authority.

Here's the goal this global restructure of the earth:

**Psalm 97:6-7 (NIV)**

- <sup>6</sup> The heavens proclaim his righteousness,  
and all peoples see his glory.  
<sup>7</sup> All who worship images are put to shame,  
those who boast in idols—worship him, all you gods!

What a wild claim! The LORD—the covenant God of a people who had been captured by the nations—rules over what? This was highly controversial in their world.

Other nations believed there were different gods ruling different territories. Did Israel think those gods were real? What does "*Worship him, all you gods!*" mean (verse 7)? We'll come back to that question if time permits.

The main point is that Israel's invisible God is unlike the idols. You cannot see the LORD, but you see the effects of his presence (verses 1-4). He reigns as *Lord of all the earth* (verse 5). He does right, and all peoples experience his majestic sovereignty (verse 6), as he puts the gods of the nations to shame (verse 7).

**Responding to his majesty (97:8-12)**

His Majesty reigns over everything and everyone in the heavens and on the earth.  
What's our response to His Majesty?

**Psalm 97:8-9 (NIV)**

<sup>8</sup> Zion hears and rejoices and the villages of Judah are glad  
because of your judgments, LORD.

<sup>9</sup> For you, LORD, are the Most High over all the earth;  
you are exalted far above all gods.

Who responds first in **verse 8**? Why are they so happy? Why do His Majesty's  
*judgements* bring them joy?

So how far do God's judgements extend? (verse 9) If God is *above all gods*, what  
does this mean for the territories that claim their gods had given them God's people?

But what if everyone doesn't submit to God's authority?

**Psalm 97:10 (NIV)**

<sup>10</sup> Let those who love the LORD hate evil,  
for he guards the lives of his faithful ones  
and delivers them from the hand of the wicked.

Who are *the wicked* in verse 10? Are these the foreign nations God needs to rescue  
his people from? Or is it those within God's own people who act unjustly and oppress  
others?

Does verse 10 say that to *love the LORD* is to *hate evil*? What are we to hate?  
Evil people? Evil acts? The Evil One? What does hating look like?

Or was this only for Old Testament times? What did Jesus do? What does the  
New Testament say is the appropriate response to God's grace (e.g. Romans 12:9;  
1 Thessalonians 5:21-22).

The point of verse 10 is divine rescue. *The wicked* don't control the earth forever.  
Just as God rescued his people from Pharaoh, the LORD *delivers them from the hand  
of the wicked*. Wow! The whole story of Scripture is in those words.

Back to those who do recognize the LORD's authority:

**Psalms 97:11-12 (NIV)**

- <sup>11</sup> Light shines on the righteous  
and joy on the upright in heart.  
<sup>12</sup> Rejoice in the LORD, you who are righteous,  
and praise his holy name.

Who were *the righteous* in Old Testament times? Were there people who were *upright in heart* before Christ came, or is this a purely theoretical group? What do you see in this Psalm as the key attitude of *the righteousness*?

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What have you learned from this psalm about praising the LORD? What is it about the LORD that draws praise from your being? Did you notice the verse that wasn't just talking about God, but was talking to God (verse 9)?

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**What about other gods? (verses 7 and 9)**

If time permits, we'll use this opportunity to take a look at the spiritual dimension as described in the Psalms. This is a complex and controversial topic. In fact, Israel's understanding of the spiritual dimension changed over time.

When the LORD founded his nation, his first commandment was: *no other gods before me* (Exodus 20:3). So, are there other gods? Well, it's complicated.

The nations made their gods by carving an image from wood or stone. The idol wasn't actually the god; it was the medium through which they offered worship to one of the gods they believed lived in the heavens. Different nations recognized different gods ruling over different territories. You needed to feed your god well (with sacrifices) so your god was strong enough to defend your territory and defeat your enemies.

In practice, Israel was often seduced by the promise of power offered by foreign gods. Jacob brought his wife's foreign gods to the Promised Land (Genesis 31:19). King Solomon did the same on many occasions (1 Kings 11:10).

From the time of the judges, Israel formed the habit of turning to other gods (Judges 2:10-23). This practice continued under the kings (1 Kings 12:28; 18:18-19:2; 2 Kings 21:1-15). Psalm 78:58 says, *they aroused his jealousy with their idols*.

But was there any substance to these other gods? In some Psalms, it sounds like God is one of many gods:

**Psalm 82:1, 5-7 (NIV)**

- <sup>1</sup> God presides in the great assembly;  
he renders judgment among the “gods”
- <sup>5</sup> “The ‘gods’ know nothing, they understand nothing.  
They walk about in darkness ...
- <sup>6</sup> “I said, ‘You are “gods”; you are all sons of the Most High.’
- <sup>7</sup> But you will die like mere mortals; you will fall like every other ruler.”

The late Michael Heiser wrote much on this topic. He believed the **divine council** (*great assembly*) was made up of spiritual beings (*gods*) who were *sons of the Most High* (verse 6). These “gods” assisted (or perhaps hindered) the LORD in running the world. People with an interest in angels and demons find Heiser’s approach attractive.

But there are other ways to read Psalm 82. These so-called “gods” (in quotes, as the NIV puts it) *know nothing, understand nothing* (verse 5). They claim to be “gods” (*sons of the Most High*), but they’re **mortals** (verse 7).

Rulers in the Ancient Near East (e.g. the Pharaohs) often claimed to be *gods*, though they were actually *mortals*. Human rulers are not gods: they die (Psalms 90:3; 103:15-19; 118:6-8; 146:3). These god-claimants fall like every other ruler in history. Though they claim to be the “gods” who run the world, God presides over them all, rendering his judgements across space and time among these “gods” (verse 1).

Would you like to discuss those different ways of Psalm 82?

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The gods of the nations are *delusions* and *lies* (Psalms 4:2; 24:4; 40:4), *worthless* (31:6), *lifeless* (106:28). They’re unable to see, hear, or help (115:4-8; 135:15-18). The LORD is greater than all these so-called gods (86:8; 95:3; 96:4; 135:5; 136:2; 138:1).

There are other spiritual beings, but we may not want to call them “gods.” Calling them “gods” probably creates misunderstandings for our world. What do you think?

That leaves us with a question. Why does Psalm 97:7 instruct the shamed images of the nations to, ***Worship him, all you gods?***

Can you think of any examples when false gods *bowed* to the LORD?

There was this time when the Philistines captured the ark. They treated it as a god (an idol) by putting it in their temple:

**1 Samuel 5:2-4 (NIV)**

- <sup>2</sup> Then they carried the ark into Dagon’s temple and set it beside Dagon.
- <sup>3</sup> When the people of Ashdod rose early the next day, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! They took Dagon and put him back in his place. <sup>4</sup> But the following morning when they rose, there was Dagon, fallen on his face on the ground before the ark of the LORD! His head and hands had been broken off and were lying on the threshold; only his body remained.

Isaiah also depicts Babylon's gods as bowing to the LORD:

**Isaiah 46:1-2 (NIV)**

- <sup>1</sup> Bel bows down, Nebo stoops low;  
their idols are borne by beasts of burden.  
The images that are carried about are burdensome,  
a burden for the weary.
- <sup>2</sup> They stoop and bow down together;  
unable to rescue the burden,  
they themselves go off into captivity.

Whenever Babylon captured a city, they burned its temple and destroyed the gods that had been unable to protect it. The captured city was now part of the Babylon's Empire, under Babylon's gods. The people discarded their previous gods (compare Isaiah 37:18-19). Well, that was the propaganda anyway.

But what about when Babylon fell to Persia? That's the context of Isaiah 45–46. Babylon's gods were then humiliated, unable to protect their people. Bel and Nebo bow to a higher power, and the Babylonians wonder why they bothered to carry these gods around when the gods couldn't help them anyway.

But the reason Babylon fell to Persia was not the Persian gods. Isaiah says it was YHWH who took Cyrus's hand and raised him up to subdue the nations (Isaiah 45:1). That means Babylon did not capture the LORD when it destroyed Jerusalem. The LORD reigns over all nations.

That's the point Psalm 97 is making. Like Isaiah said, the nations are merely *bowing down to a block of wood, feeding on ashes, a deluded heart misleading them so they cannot realize, "Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"* (Isaiah 44:19)

That's the sense in which the idols must bow to the LORD.

Your thoughts?

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## Response

In light of Psalm 97, what is your understanding of **praise**? How would you define it? How would you practice it? (Hint: it's not just singing.)

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In light of Psalm 91, what is your understanding of God's **protection**? How would you describe it? How would you practice it?

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Greek Orthodox churches paint almost every available surface with pictures that present the story of God's anointed (the Christ) running the world. For 1500 years, the dominant image in Greek churches has been the *Pantocrator*.

Literally translated, that means the All-Ruler, the sovereign over everyone and everything: the Almighty, the LORD of hosts. *Pantocrator* is used 180 times in the Septuagint.

In the Bible's final book, the *Pantocrator* (the All-Ruler) is identified as both the Christ and the Lord God Almighty (Revelation 1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7, 14; 19:6, 15; 21:22).

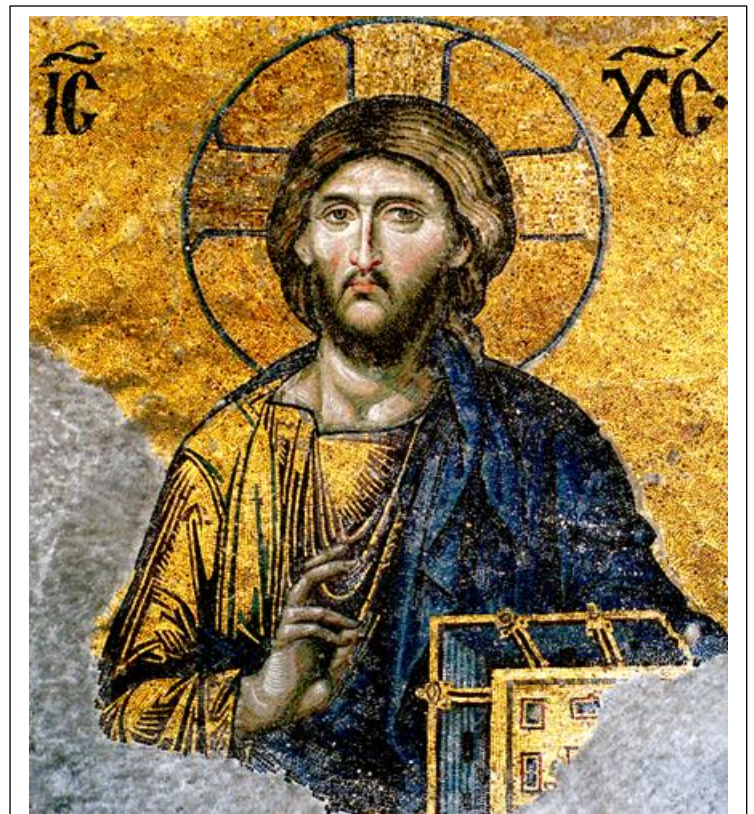
What difference does it make to you to recognize the scope of God's authority as *Pantocrator*? What difference does this make to the way you live, pray, and praise?

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The Pantocrator, Hagia Sophia. Source: [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pantocrator)

Next week, we look at the Book 5, the final book within the Psalms. Please read **Psalms 118 and 145**.