

Johann Jacob Schütz was the son of a German lawyer and wanted to study law himself. Schütz grew up in a Lutheran congregation, pastored by Philip Spener. Being part of Spener’s congregation, Shutz was strongly influenced by the ideas of Spener and held close to the practice of piety and discipleship as a means of spiritual growth. The first stanza of his hymn would be worth putting to memory for any disciple of Christ:

*Sing praise to God who reigns above, the God of all creation,
the God of power, the God of love, the God of our salvation.
My soul with comfort rich he fills, and every grief he gently stills:
to God all praise and glory!*

The text of “Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above” includes a declaration of God’s reigning power and endless mercy, especially during times of trial, persecution, and suffering. It brings to my mind the opening line of Psalm 99: “*The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble,*” as well a later line that reflects Israel’s history, “*You were to Israel a forgiving God.*” The text of Shutz’s hymn was written after the onset of the Protestant Reformation, which, by the way, marks its 500th anniversary this month. In October, 1517 Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenburg Cathedral. Luther’s aim was to protest the selling of indulgences by Johann Tetzel, a Dominican Friar who knew exactly how to market indulgences to German churches.

In the medieval Roman Catholic Church superstition was rampant. Doctrines like purgatory were useful for keeping citizens in fear, and lent strength to wild ideas about demons and witches. Johann Tetzel fed on those superstitious fears. It was very easy to convince people who believed that their dear mother, departed wife, or beloved child were at that very moment agonizing in flames in purgatory. Paying for release from their torment with the purchase of indulgences was Tetzel’s trade. In a sense, the sale of indulgences was a way to get the poor to pay taxes willingly. Tetzel’s preaching on indulgences was considered by many of his contemporaries to be an abuse of the sacrament of penance, and of course in Germany it sparked an indignant reaction from Martin Luther. In effect, Tetzel became a salesman whose product was to cause a scandal in Europe that sparked the greatest crisis in the history of the Western church—the Protestant Reformation.

There is a story, almost certainly more fable than history, that the leader of a gang of ruffians approached Tetzel to obtain pardon through the purchase of an indulgence. “Will indulgences forgive future sins as well?” he asked. Tetzel assured him that they would, and the young man immediately paid him in silver. That night, confident that he was forgiven, the young man robbed Tetzel, getting his money back, and more.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed the death warrant for indulgences to the cathedral door at Wittenburg. His 95 theses were powerful arguments against everything about the sale of indulgences. Luther was a convincing salesman in his own right. He was popular both with the people and with the prince. His words were soon distributed all over Germany and Johann Tetzel’s sale of indulgences took a

sharp decline. One of the “Solas” that arose from the reformation was Sola Scriptura, “Scripture alone,” as our source for spiritual truth. Martin Luther worked hard to make the Bible available to the common people of Germany, so that people could read and understand it for themselves, rather than relying on Rome for answers. It is common to see hymn texts from this period that are steeped in Scripture, like “Sing Praise to God...”

Psalm 99 is one of those Scriptures that must have inspired the German hymn writer Johann Jacob Shutz. Psalm 99 has a line that most scholars agree is its central theme: “*He is holy,*” repeated in verses 3 and 5, and then in its last line, “*the Lord our God is holy.*” It also would have been appropriate for us to sing in today’s service the Reginald Heber hymn, “Holy, Holy, Holy.” We know God is holy, but how are we to respond to God’s holiness? We can best respond by rearranging our thoughts and the manner in which we live our lives to be more in line with God’s holy will. “*Great is the LORD in Zion.*”

“*Exalt the Lord our God*” is another repeated refrain from Psalm 99. Our job is to praise and worship God so we get to know God. We can grow in our relationship to God by praising God; and he is worthy of that praise. Our hymns of praise teach us that praises belong to God, and we do well to lift our voices to him.

Bryce Canyon is a wonderful sight in the state of Utah. It was named for a 19th century farmer named Ebenezer Bryce. There are huge trees in the canyon over 700 years old. The views are breathtaking. God’s handiwork is awe-inspiring there, seen clearly in every direction. But some people don’t see so clearly. Ebenezer Bryce was asked what it was like to live in the midst of such a pristine canvas of God’s artistry; all he could say was, “It’s a heck of a place to lose a cow.”

If you’re going to learn who God is, what God is like, and what he wants you to do with your life, I suggest spending more time praising God than the time you spend thinking about how tough life is, and where you put your cow (or maybe your smart phone or your car keys). And as you get to know the mighty King who loves justice, you will begin to understand that our task changes from knowing God to doing what God wants us to do.

We sometimes have a sense of embarrassment about other people thinking we could be religious fanatics if we worship God too much, if we praise him too often. We need to be more like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. These Old Testament saints angered King Nebuchadnezzar by refusing to worship him. The king got so angry at their holy lives that he had the furnace heated seven times hotter than usual. But even the fire was not able to touch these men of God. Honoring their God was more important to them than the king’s ego!

The writer of Psalm 99 gives us another trio to follow from the history of Israel—Moses the deliverer, Aaron the priest and Samuel the prophet.

Jackie Mickels tells the story of the day after their wedding when the 4-year- old ring bearer asked his mother if he had gotten married the day before. “No,” she reassured him. Little Jerry’s reply: “Then what in the world was I doing up there?” (Jackie Mickels, Madrid, Nebraska. *Christian Reader*, “Rolling Down

the Aisle.”) Sometimes our activities make us wonder like that, “What in the world am I doing?” Our best preparation for doing our best for God is to know God, and to live holy lives before him. *“For the LORD our God is holy.”*

I’d like to a few lines from Psalm 99 and place them beside the last verse of Johann Jacob Shutz’s hymn, “Sing Praise to God Who Reigns Above,” to show how the hymn and the Scripture proclaim one and the same message.

1) Let all who name Christ’s holy name give God the praise and glory.

“Let them praise your great and awesome name— he is holy.” (v. 3)

God’s name is unique it is the only name we know that is truly HOLY. It is pure; it is the most perfect word you could say in the Hebrew language. When you speak the great and awesome name of God you speak a Holy word and the most powerful word you could utter. The Bible tells us that: *“at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth”* (Philippians 2:10 NIV). Thank God today for his Name.

2) Let all who know his power proclaim aloud the wondrous story.

“LORD our God, you answered them; you were to Israel a forgiving God, though you punished their misdeeds.” (v. 8)

We have a historical record of how God treats us, judges us and makes decisions about us in the lives of Moses, Aaron and Samuel, God’s servants. In other words, we can go back a long, long, long way and discover how, why, what God has done to demonstrate his love for us in the relationship he initiated with his servants before us. We are in good company since we too can call on the living God just as Moses, Aaron and Samuel did. Even though we are not a Levite or a Jewish Priest, God will hear our voice. Be thankful that God hears our voice and that God has a history and a relationship with us.

3) Cast every idol from its throne; the Lord is God, and he alone:

“He sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake.” (v. 1)

There will be an election day a little over two weeks from now and many of us can’t name even one candidate running for election this year. But we all know that elected officials come and go. God, however, is seated on his throne as our King forever. Take comfort in knowing that we are ultimately his subjects and come under his rule and not only the rule of men and women. Yes, the nations should tremble when they hear this. He is enthroned between the cherubim, angelic beings that served as guardians of Eden and who now flank the throne of God. The mercy seat in the Temple was also adorned with cherubim. Be thankful that God reigns as our eternal King.

4) To God all praise and glory!

“Exalt the LORD our God and worship at his holy mountain.” (v. 9)

God is to be EXALTED, says the Psalm, lifted high above the people. Our God’s place is not lowly, not limited to the things of earth but unlimited above ALL people and things. Theologians talk about God’s *transcendence* and *immanence*, that is, God’s awesomeness that is great and far above us; and God’s

nearness that reaches down to each of us personally. Be thankful that we can gather in this place every Sunday to exalt the Lord our God and worship him together.

Did you hear about the guy who got hit in the head with a can of pop? He was lucky it was a soft drink. I think the writer of Psalm 99 tries to hit us in the head with the soft and hard reality of the Lord our God whom we worship. He is both transcendent and immanent. He is high above us and very near to us at the same time. For this, be thankful and go out into the world with deepest gratitude. Amen.