

August 13, 2023

PRAISE FOR THE GOD WHO JUDGES AND SAVES

Psalm 75

(1 of 4 in a series of selected Psalms)

I'm going to begin this sermon on Psalm 75 exactly where you think I'd begin this sermon—talking about an obscure offering that is mentioned in Deuteronomy 14. You can blame it on me thinking through this class that Spencer Pratt and I are going to teach this fall in Sunday school. Anyway, here's the offering. In Deuteronomy 14 the Lord commanded each Israelite to take ten percent of everything that had each year—ten percent of their grain harvest, cattle, sheep, goats, wine, oil, etc.—and set it aside. Then, they were to take all of it and go to Jerusalem where they would eat it as the most amazing feast a person could imagine. That was their offering.

And it gets better. If the Lord prospered you so much that year that you thought, "There's no way I could get all of this stuff to Jerusalem," then you were instructed to take all of it and sell it, turning all of that into cash. Then, they were to go to Jerusalem with a wad of cash, and then they were to spend that money on whatever they desired—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craved—and eat it there before God and rejoice. And why wouldn't you rejoice? I mean, can you imagine taking ten percent of your annual pay and using it to provide a feast for yourself? This is not one of those times when you'd say, "Should I get the chocolate cake or coconut cake, red wine or white?" Yes. The answer is yes.

They were even supposed to take an extra ten percent every three years and set aside so that the Levites, widows, orphans, and sojourners could get in on this. After all, the Levites had no inheritance, nothing they could consume, and neither would the widows, orphans, and sojourners. And, man, what a bummer it would be for those people to stand on the roadside as everybody was heading to Jerusalem, saying, "I hope you guys really have a good time. We'll just be here. We'll probably eat some of this grain that you guys dropped." But by everyone putting aside an extra ten percent for them every three years, everybody could get in on this feast.

But why? Why did the Lord have them do this? Moses commanded them to do this so that, "You may learn to fear the Lord your God always" (Deut 14:23). Now, how did that work? How did setting aside ten percent of your income each year in order to feast like there's no tomorrow lead them to fear the Lord? I think the answer is that they were to learn to fear (or revere or stand in awe) God's goodness, kindness, generosity, and provision. Each time they found themselves anxious about finances or needs they had, they would stop and say, "Wait a second. Remember that feast? That was a reminder that God graciously provided for us. We can trust him to do so again." It was a tangible reminder of God's goodness and generosity so that they might learn to revere their good and generous God.

Doesn't that tell you something about the heart of God toward his people that he would prescribe this feast offering so that his people might learn to rest in him, trust him, thank him,

and praise him as their provider? Well, he's done the same for us, not only by giving us Deuteronomy 14 to read but also by giving us Psalm 75. Psalm 75 is a psalm, we might say, written in order that we might read it and learn to fear the Lord. It's written so that we might revere and stand in awe of God as the one who loves us, cares for us, will save us, and who deserves our praise and thanks. I think that's why the Lord inspired Asaph to write this psalm.

It is a psalm written by Asaph. And we see that it is according to "Do Not Destroy," which was probably a familiar tune that an Israelite could sing the psalm to. But one thing that is helpful in understanding our psalm is its placement in the canon. Psalms 73-83 are all written by Asaph, and so it seems that they've been placed here together within the psalter intentionally. And I think we can see this when we consider the end of Psalm 74 and followed by Psalm 75. The last thing Asaph writes at the end of Psalm 74 is: "Arise, O God, defend your cause; remember how the foolish scoff at you all the day! Do not forget the clamor of your foes, the uproar of those who rise against you, which goes up continually!" That is, he calls for the Lord to judge his enemies, and Psalm 75 seems to be a direct answer to this request. In fact, we might link Psalms 73-75. In Psalm 73 David considers the prosperity of the wicked in this age, finally finding peace when he considers their end—that they will face judgment. Then, in Psalm 74, he calls for that judgment. And in Psalm 75 the Lord declares that he will indeed judge. But in the midst of Psalm 75 answering Asaph's call in Psalm 74, it describes the character of our good God so that we might rest in him, trust him, thank him, and praise him. What does it tell us about God? I'll note four things.

God has shown us great grace

This is how the psalm opens. Asaph writes, "We give thanks to you, O God; we give thanks for your name is near. We recount your wondrous deeds" (v. 1). When we read that, my guess is that the phrase that is most unclear is, "Your name is near." What does that mean? Well, remember when Moses went up to receive the tablets of stone from the Lord at Mount Sinai only to come back down the mountain and find that the Israelites had fashioned a golden calf and begun engaging in idolatry and sexual immorality?¹ The Lord informed Moses, at first, that he would destroy his people. But after Moses interceded the Lord told him that he'd allow the people to live, but he would not allow his presence to dwell with them any longer. And so Moses interceded once more, noting that God's presence was the only thing that made Israel distinct from any other people on the face of the earth. And once more, God agreed, telling Moses that he'd be present with his people. But finally Moses asked the Lord to show him his glory. It seemed that Moses couldn't imagine continuing to lead this stiff-necked people outside of a glimpse of who his God was. And the Lord answered Moses, saying, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The Lord'" (Ex 33:19). Then we read, "The LORD descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. The LORD passed by him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and

¹ Exodus 32:6 reads, "And the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play." The phrase "rose up to play" most likely denotes sexual immorality."

gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation" (Ex 34:6-7).

Interestingly, Moses asked to see the Lord's glory, and the Lord had answered that he'd proclaim to Moses his name as he allowed his goodness to pass before him. Then, when the Lord revealed his name, it wasn't simply that he declared his name but his character. God was allowing Moses to know who he was. He would allow Israel to know him in a way that no other nation would. In fact, Moses would later say to the Israelites, "What great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him?" (Deut 4:7).

Therefore, it seems that Asaph is recognizing, as he considers God's works on behalf of Israel and how he'd made his name known to them—declaring that he is their God and they his people—that God has shown himself near to them throughout their history. And he thanks God for it. Again, this was unlike what God had done for any other people on the face of the earth. That is reason for praise.

But let's dwell on this a bit more. This very nation that God had revealed himself to and allowed his name to be near them had just been engaged in the grossest kind of idolatry. After the Lord had delivered them from Egypt, they'd fashioned a golden calf and said of it, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" (Ex 32:4). And that very people God had chosen to make them his own, to commit himself to as their God, and to allow them to know his presence and his name. We might say, "They better be thankful."

But have we considered our own position? Perhaps we don't dwell on this enough. The New Testament speaks the same way of us. It tells us that God has made us his people, and he is our God. He's committed himself to us, determined to do us good. He's made himself known to us and saved us. And we deserved none of it. Like Israel, we had rebelled against our Lord, making ourselves his enemies.

Brothers and sisters, there are many others that God has not set his affection on, and there's nothing in us that deserves to know him as our God. His name is near to us, and we see it in his wondrous deeds toward us. Therefore, let us dwell on his grace to us and give him thanks. How can we not love, trust, and be thankful to a God who has chosen to make us his own? And it gets better for us. Next, we're reminded that God is sovereign over all things.

God is sovereign over all things

In verses 2-3 the Lord speaks. You can see the change in the pronouns. In verse 1, the people speak, thanking God that his name is near. In verses 2-3, the Lord begins speaking in first person (thus the pronoun, "I"). He establishes two truths here which both affirm his sovereignty (i.e. control) over all things. First, he says, "At the set time that I appoint I will judge with equity" (v. 2). In other words, God has determined the day when he will bring final judgment. I'll get more

into the nature of God as judge when we look at verses 4-8, but note here that God's day of judgment is already appointed.

What this means is that God has already fixed the day (from eternity past) when he will bring final judgment. He's not being blown around reacting to evil in this world. He is the sovereign God who reigns over the universe and will bring judgment on the day that he has deemed. Nothing is outside of his control. He reacts to nothing. And judgment is coming exactly the moment that he has purposed for it to come.

Second, God tell us that he is upholding the earth. He declares in verse 3, "When the earth totters, and all its inhabitants, it is I who keep steady its pillars." From our perspective it can feel like evil is getting the upper hand, like the world is spinning out of control, and that society world-wide is set to collapse. But the Lord tells us that he's steadying the world. He's keeping it from utter destruction. He's keeping sin and its effects within the bounds that he's determined in order to steady the earth and uphold it.

Isn't this comforting to you? The Lord has appointed the day when he'll judge, and in the meanwhile, he's steadying the earth so that the "erosive effects of evil" do not upend creation. He's upholding and preserving it. When we see Babylon brought down and Nazi Germany's efforts thwarted, we can see the Lord's hand, steadying the pillars of the earth, keeping it from too much instability.² Of course, this isn't an excuse for us to be inactive when we can have a hand in bringing about good in our world. But it does allow us to trust the Lord and find comfort when we see so much out of our control and can remind ourselves that he is in control. Next, we see that we can rest in light of the fact that God will judge the earth.

God will judge the earth

This is the heart of the psalm. We see the Lord express his warning to the wicked in verses 4-5. He says, "I say to the boastful, 'Do not boast,' and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horn; do not lift up your horn on high or speak with the haughty neck.'"

The Lord here is offering a warning. He tells the inhabitants of the earth not to be boastful and not to rise up in rebellion against God. It is a warning much like one might offer when a man is threatening attack, and another man says, "Don't come at me, or I'll shoot you." The wicked are no match for the Lord, obviously, and will not prevail against him. Thus, the Lord charges them not to run toward his wrath in their rebellion. This warning is a word of grace to those who would dare continue in their rebellion against God.

Then, in verses 6-8 the theme continues as Asaph now speaks of the Lord's coming judgment, saying, "For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up, but

² Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 492.

it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another. For in the hand of the LORD there is a cup with foaming wine, well mixed, and he pours out from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.”

With this, Asaph reminds his readers (and you and me) not to look elsewhere for the source for how one is lifted up and another one is put down. God is the sovereign one. He is the one who lifts up and puts down. Again, this is one means he uses to stabilize the earth and keep it from the decaying effects of evil. But then Asaph adds that strong word of judgment, reminding us that God will make the wicked drink down the cup of wine of his wrath down to the dregs.

Now, my guess is that this language might make us a bit uncomfortable. Are we supposed to say, “Amen,” at Asaph’s reminder that God will pour out his merciless wrath on the wicked? No doubt we all feel a bit hesitant and uncomfortable with that. But let’s consider two realities first (and then a third) as we think through this.

First, believers in the Scripture often pray for and celebrate the judgment of the wicked. Hannah, after being barren for a long time only to find out she is pregnant with Samuel, prays a prayer of praise, saying, “The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king and exalt the power of his anointed” (1 Sam 2:10). And Mary prays something similar when she finds out that the Christ child has been conceived in her womb as she speaks of God casting “down the mighty from their thrones” (Luke 1:52). Then, in Revelation 6 we have a picture of the martyrs before the altar in heaven (representing all believers³) crying out to the Lord, saying, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev 6:10). And, finally, their prayer is answered as the saints in Revelation 15-16 sing a song of praise as an angel declares to the Lord, “Just are you, O Holy One, who is and who was, for you brought these judgments. For they have shed the blood of the saints and prophets, and you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve” (Rev 16:5-6). And I could multiply these examples, but this should suffice in showing that there are numerous examples in Scripture of believers longing for, praying for, and praising God for the judgment of the wicked.

Second, surely our lack of intense persecution in our personal experience has left us at odds with the longings of many believers across the world and across the ages. I read a story this week of a man named Billy (almost certainly not his real name).⁴ Billy was born into a religious family in Mogadishu. His father was a revered religious leader in the area who had actually the Koran in its entirety. But Billy had gotten hold of an English Bible and began reading it. And, after three

³ In the book of Revelation it seems that all believers are represented as martyrs—those who will suffer and endure and bear testimony to Christ to the point of death.

⁴ <https://www.tyndale.com/sites/readthearc/true-stories-of-the-persecuted-church-around-the-world/>

years of reading the Scripture, he was converted—seeing the glory of the crucified and risen Lord.

Instantly, Billy's life was endangered. His own family threatened him. Finally, six years after becoming a believer, Billy met his first fellow Somali Christian. They began finding and gathering together other believers so that fourteen believers in the area started an underground church. But only a year into their gathering, the church was discovered by some Muslims in the area, and terrible persecution began.

Within a short time, their deaths began mounting. One was shot to death. Another was kidnapped and executed. A couple was killed in their bedroom. Still another was taken off of a bus and executed in broad daylight. By the time the dust had cleared, twelve of the believers had been martyred, with none of their murderers ever prosecuted. Billy and one other survived only by fleeing to another country.

This level of persecution has not been the experience of most believers living in the United States for the last 300 plus years. There is much evidence that this is changing. Fifty years ago it might be hard to convince believers in our country that they might lose their job or not be able to attain a job because of their commitment to obey Jesus. I don't think that would be too hard to convince you of today. But our lack of intense persecution has put us in a place where it is difficult for our hearts to resonate with these portions of Scripture we've noted and that we see in Psalm 75. But perhaps we'd feel differently if we had to watch our spouses or children dragged away and murdered for following Christ. We might pray, "God, judge our enemies."

Yet, we might counter (rightly so), that Jesus told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. And indeed we should, and we must realize as we do so that this isn't dismissing judgment. The reality is that the judgment for our sins will be poured out on Jesus so that we don't have to bear it ourselves, or we will refuse to bow the knee to Jesus, and we will bear his wrath ourselves. But either way, wrath for sin is poured out. Either Jesus drinks the cup at the cross for us or we will drink the cup of wrath down to the dregs ourselves. And so, we can pray that our enemies will repent, turn to Christ, and turn from their rebellion, and we can trust that if they do not, God will pour out his judgment in the end—even in response to their persecution of his children. So, in the midst of great evil in this world, you and I can rest in the God who will judge the earth. And all this brings us to the final note of the psalm, namely, that we should worship our God because he deserves our praise.

God deserves our praise

Asaph opens the psalm with thanksgiving to the God whose name is near, and he closes the psalm declaring that he will sing praises to the sovereign God who lifts up the righteous and judges the wicked. This should be our response as well.

The ancient Israelite would sit around a feast, learning to revere the goodness and generosity of God. Whatever our means, let us contemplate the God who graciously made himself known to

us and made us his own, the God who exercises sovereignty over all, and the God who judges the wicked as he saves his righteous people. And let us come to the table, remembering that all of these realities are seen clearly in the cross. In the cross, we see how God has made us his own and revealed his name and character to us. In the cross, we see God's sovereignty, judgment, and salvation achieved as he crushes the head of the serpent and frees us from our sin and pays the penalty that we deserved. Therefore, let us come to the table, thanking, praising, trusting, and resting in our redeeming Lord. Amen.