

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	The Psalms		Pastor/Teacher
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TO THE LAST DROP

Introduction: It is often difficult for modern American Christians to understand why the Israelites would so often celebrate God’s judgment in the Old Testament. This hymn helps us grasp the basic answer: that saving God’s people means condemning their enemies. Delivering the Hebrew slaves from Pharaoh required wrath against their enslavers, the Egyptians. Giving them the land of Canaan as their inheritance required holy war against the Canaanites. This pattern remains true, with significant differences, for Christians under the New Covenant, as we will see after we have properly meditated upon Psalm 75 in its original context.

1. Considering the structure of this psalm reveals an important point about the nature of biblical worship. Many members of Reformed churches may not realize this, but traditional Reformed worship follows specific patterns. We do not have liturgy spelled out in detail for us, as the Anglicans do, but our order of service is guided by strong principles which our theological forefathers discerned from the Scriptures. As we will see, Psalm 75 is an excellent example of one of these principles, known as the dialogical principle.
 - a. This means that our worship is designed as a dialogue between God and his people, so there is regular movement back and forth between his speech to us and ours to him. God calls us to worship him, and we respond with a song that focuses on our reasons for worshipping him. We read God’s Law, then respond by praying a prayer of confession, and then an elder assures us from Scripture that our sins are pardoned in Christ. In this dialogical pattern, each element of the worship service has something to do with what came before and what comes after.
 - b. In Psalm 75, verse 1 is the psalmist speaking in his own voice, verses 2-5 are God speaking, verses 6-9 are the psalmist responding, and verse 10 is the Lord having the last word.
 - c. This beautifully reflects the fact that in public worship the Lord invites us into his house for fellowship, which is the natural realization of the essential promise of the Covenant of Grace: “I will be their God, and they will be my people.”¹ Verse 1 of Psalm 75 calls to mind this promise by saying, “We give thanks, for your name is near.” That is to say, God remains committed and present with true believers, his covenant people.² The method of communication between the parties of this covenant is this sacred back-and-forth communion of worship.

¹ Compare Genesis 17:8, Jeremiah 31:33, 32:38, Ezekiel 11:20, 37:23-27, Zechariah 8:8, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Hebrews 8:10, and Revelation 21:3. For more on the Reformed doctrine of the Covenant of Grace, see *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored*, 2nd Ed., Chapter 3, by Michael G. Brown and Zach Keele.

² God “putting his name” on his people is a way God frequently speaks of the way he has bound himself to bless Israel as he did Abraham their father. For example, after Aaron’s famous blessing, God describes the effect it will have on the people in Numbers 6:27: “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” The idea is similar to a wife changing her name in marriage so that the unity of their new household is more obvious to all.

- d. Again, it may be difficult for many Christians to understand why believers would want to fellowship with God in order to celebrate his wrath, but consider the problems that the previous two psalms raise. Psalm 73, as we saw, was driven by the general absence of justice in this world, leaving room for wicked, powerful men to run roughshod over everyone else, even making themselves out to be like God. Psalm 74 focused more specifically on the destruction of the Temple in the Exile and cried out in desperation, “O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?” (74:1) Psalm 75 promises the cosmic resolution of these questions.
2. In verses 2-5, the Lord promises to enact his perfect, absolute justice at one specific time, humbling the arrogant rebels who infest his kingdom now.
- a. Verse 2 makes clear that God has *appointed* the time at which he will judge all the world.
- i. Earthly courts can be stalled by unexpected events, bribery, or a hung jury, but the universal court date has never been delayed or reset. It cannot be moved one minute forward or backward because it is a decree of the absolutely sovereign and eternal Creator.
 - ii. It is appropriate to praise God for this fact because we know he has appointed this day with the vulnerability of his sheep in mind. If he had not done so, no one would be left alive at the end of this dark age.³
- b. Verse 3 reminds us that the Lord will preserve the earth until the appointed day. It may feel like civilization is in decline and the old order we were used to is falling apart, but the Lord’s steady hand is still at the wheel. This should remind us of Noah’s Covenant for two reasons.
- i. The nations of this world do deserve in many ways the kind of total destruction which God inflicted with the Flood. Human nature has not changed since then. But because of his promise to Noah, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”⁴ Psalm 75:3 shows that God is serious about keeping those promises.
 - ii. In the wake of the Flood, God also made provision for the limited restraint of human evil through imperfect institutions. We see him establish the death penalty for murder in Genesis 9:5-6, but this also teaches the most basic principle of true justice: punishment must be proportionate to the crime. In this case it is “blood for blood” but in other cases it is eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, property for property.⁵ This in turn requires the development of human judicial institutions, and especially civil government. These institutions are part of how God sovereignly preserves the world, even though they are always deeply flawed. Even though we rightly wish that our political leaders had the courage to punish popular

³ “And if the Lord had not cut short the days, no human being would be saved. But for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he shortened the days.” - Mark 13:20 (and also Matthew 24:22)

⁴ Genesis 8:21-22.

⁵ David VanDrunen has an excellent discussion of the Noahic Covenant’s relationship to broader issues of justice in chapter 9 of *Politics After Christendom*.

evils, or that they did not punish faithful Christians for following God's Law, they are nevertheless still far better than anarchy.⁶

c. After describing his own glorious justice and sovereignty in verses 2 and 3, God warns the arrogant to humble themselves before Judgment Day in verses 4-5.

- i. This may seem hypocritical to some. Was God not just boasting about his perfection in the previous verses? Yes, in a sense, he was, but the reason it is wrong for us to boast is that every good gift we have comes from God alone.⁷ Therefore, for human beings to boast is to lie and rob God of his glory, but for God it is truthful and merely claiming what is already his by right.
- ii. Pay special note to the imagery of verse 5. Horns are a common symbol of power, and especially military might in Scripture. It is rooted in the idea of a ram showing his dominance over other males in the herd, and then lifting up his horns to show off his status as the alpha male.⁸ So God is essentially warning the wicked here not to think they are invincible when facing him or lord it over his people. Just because they have subdued all their human enemies does not mean they would have any ability *at all* to resist the Lord when he is revealed in wrath. We'll see this image of horns later on in the psalm, as well.

3. Asaph appropriately responds to this declaration with great reasons to be humble in verses 6-8.

a. The first of these, in verse 6, is that no exaltation will come for Israel from anyone on earth.

- i. The east and the west are used here as a *merism*. That is, opposites paired together to represent the whole of something. For example, the phrase, "the young and the old" does not exclude the middle-aged. It rhetorically represents all ages. "The heavens and the earth" is a way of describing the entire creation, including the seas even though they are not explicitly mentioned. Therefore "east and west" here includes the other directions of north and south, as well.
- ii. "Wilderness" refers to the large uninhabited regions around Israel, particularly the Negev and the Arabian desert. He doesn't have to give any more explanation why help is not coming from those directions than to call them "wilderness."
- iii. He likely does not mention the north because that is where the clear and present danger of the Assyrians, and later the Babylonians, will come from. The Israelites would not have to be told why no help is coming from that direction.⁹

b. Verse 7 describes God's justice as lifting up (exalting) the righteous and putting down (humiliating) the wicked.

- i. This fits very well with the theme of arrogance and boasting we have already seen in the psalm. Think of how richly satisfying it is when, in so many stories, the

⁶ As many have observed, the Roman political and judicial systems were very far from ideal, even allowing all kinds of sexual perversion and infanticide, yet Paul still calls them "the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" in Romans 13:4.

⁷ "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change." - James 1:17

⁸ Horns are used as symbols in the visions of Daniel 7-8 no less than 11 times to portray the power and the pride of history's great empires. This motif is also very common in Revelation, of course.

⁹ In fact, the north becomes almost synonymous with Israel's enemies in the poetry and prophecy of the Old Testament. For example, where does Gog come from in Ezekiel? "You will come from your place out of the uttermost parts of the north, you and many peoples with you, all of them riding on horses, a great host, a mighty army." (38:15)

arrogant villain finally gets his comeuppance. There is often a strong element not just of recompense for the deed itself, but also of humiliation; being made to eat his own boastful words, as it were.¹⁰ No one can deny the justice of this: if you lift yourself up (verse 4), God will bring you down (verse 7).

- ii. By the same token, God also lifts up those who have been laid low in this world, and none have been laid as low as his own people. From oppression under the Egyptians, the Philistines, their own leaders such as King Ahab, the Babylonians, and the Persians, there is rarely a period of unqualified peace and prosperity for Israel. This continues into the New Testament, wherein every single book has at least some discussion of persecution for the name of Christ.
- c. The imagery of verse 8 is arguably the most striking in the whole psalm, and draws us directly to the atonement Christ suffered on our behalf.
 - i. The psalmist dwells for a moment on the description of this wine in order to drive home the point that it is *potent*.¹¹ This is not Manischewitz. In fact, this is not meant to be a pleasant experience at all; you could not endure the burning if it passed down your throat. In other passages, this cup of God's wrath drives the nations mad¹² and causes them to fall down dead.¹³ The idea is that when God's wrath appears, people will act as irrationally as drunkards.
 - ii. The fact that it is mixed does not mean it is diluted, as with water. It is mixed with spices, and some commentators even suggest this may mean powerful drugs, that add to the potency rather than take away from it. When wine was taken from storage in the ancient Middle East, they would strain out these spices, leaving dregs that no one would ordinarily drink. It would be like drinking bitter tea and then eating the leaves out of the strainer.
 - iii. Asaph says no one will escape the full power of this cup. "All the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs." Every last drop.
 - iv. This imagery of making his enemies drink the cup of his wrath also reminds us of God's great power and total control over the situation. They have so little power to resist the final judgment, they cannot even close their mouths to him if he should order them to open.
4. This "cup" is undoubtedly the background for Jesus's words in the Garden of Gethsemane, as he prayed, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."¹⁴ As we have seen, this wrath is absolutely inevitable. If God did not judge sinners he would not be just, so the penalty had to be paid.¹⁵

¹⁰ For example, in the book of Esther, even before Haman actually receives his just execution for plotting the genocide of the Jews, he is profoundly humiliated by having to parade through the streets honoring his enemy and social inferior, Mordecai. The author goes out of his way to highlight Haman's shame: "Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered." (6:12)

¹¹ James M. Hamilton Jr. suggests in his commentary (Vol 2, pg 29) that we are supposed to think this wine is actually mixed from the fruits of people's sins. I wish there were clearer support for this connection from the context of Psalm 75, but it is still an interesting suggestion that shows how this punishment fits the crime.

¹² "Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: 'Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.'" - Jeremiah 25:15-16

¹³ "Then you shall say to them, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Drink, be drunk and vomit, fall and rise no more, because of the sword that I am sending among you.'" - Jeremiah 25:27

¹⁴ Matthew 26:39.

¹⁵ This resolves the tension between God's mercy and his justice. For example, in Exodus 34:7 God presents himself as "forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty." No earthly judge can claim to be so merciful and so just at the same time.

- a. We even see a clear sign of the frenzy of fear that the prophets said this cup would inflict, when Luke 22:44 records, “And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.” No ordinary earthly pain caused him to fear this way, not even his temptations in the wilderness. But draining the cup of God’s wrath down to the dregs would have utterly overwhelmed his human nature if he were not also divine.
- b. If you are united to Christ by faith, this means there is not a drop of wrath left for you. It has all been swallowed by your Savior, down to the dregs! This would be unjust in a human court, because earthly judges have no power to unite the offender and the substitute. The offender would go out with his heart even more hardened and commit worse evils. But in the court of the Creator, there is power not only to acquit but also to create new, repentant life in the sinner. The cup of God’s wrath for Christ becomes the cup of God’s blessing, giving life to us, as we are reminded when we take the Lord’s Supper each week.
- c. The same savior who drank this cup of God’s wrath will also pour it out on those who do not know him on the appointed day. This is when our true enemies will be finally defeated. In this life, we should be very careful not to assume that any particular human being or group of people will not be saved, but at the same time be grateful that God will let no sin unpunished.
- d. Christians are being hounded all over the world today, most obviously by hostile governments but also by social ostracization, the devil’s temptations, and our own fleshly desires. We have real and powerful enemies in this world, but they will not endure. They will all be humbled and destroyed on the appointed Day of the Lord.

The final call and response in verse 9 and 10 summarizes the whole psalm well. God’s people will continue to sing his praises for his coming salvation through judgment, when he will cut down every rebel who resists his righteous rule and exalts those who are washed in the blood of his Son. Revelation 22, the very last chapter in the Bible, combines this absolute principle of retribution together with the atonement of Christ. “Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.” (Revelation 22:12-15) What will separate the righteous from the wicked on the last day is not the inherent righteousness of one versus the other, but whether those sins have been washed by the one who drank this cup of wrath down to its very last drop.