



Daily Devotions in the Psalms

Psalm 75-78

Monday 13th July - Psalm 75

We praise you, God,
we praise you, for your Name is near;
people tell of your wonderful deeds.
2 You say, "I choose the appointed time;
it is I who judge with equity.
3 When the earth and all its people quake,
it is I who hold its pillars firm.
4 To the arrogant I say, 'Boast no more,'
and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horns.
5 Do not lift your horns against heaven;
do not speak so defiantly.'"
6 No one from the east or the west
or from the desert can exalt themselves.

7 It is God who judges:
He brings one down, he exalts another.
8 In the hand of the Lord is a cup
full of foaming wine mixed with spices;
he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth
drink it down to its very dregs.
9 As for me, I will declare this forever;
I will sing praise to the God of Jacob,
10 who says, "I will cut off the horns of all the wicked,
but the horns of the righteous will be lifted up."

My first full time teaching job was in a chaplaincy department on the north shore of Sydney. And my boss at the time believed that you could sum up the storyline of the Bible with "God humbles the proud and exalts the humble". It's a pattern we see repeated throughout the Bible and it's one we see here.

In this Psalm God is praised because his Name (shorthand for all that He is) is near. His wonderful deeds are mentioned in verse 1 and explained in the following verses as judgment. He shuts the mouths of the arrogant (v. 4-6) and pours out his judgment on the earth (v. 8) I wonder, do we praise God for His judgment?

God's judgment is connected to His holiness. He must judge because He is holy. Sometimes we struggle with this; we wonder whether He judges fairly. We hate the idea of people we love being condemned (and rightly so!) but we question whether God will judge rightly. We entertain the idea that it might be good if God never judged anyone.

As I've wrestled with the idea of God's righteous wrath, I've discovered that it is meant to move me to humility and praise. I remember that in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus begged the Father to take the cup from Him...but the Father didn't. The cup we read of in this Psalm, Jesus drank in full so that we might never taste it.

The cross shows us how evil our rebellion against God is and how deep His grace is towards us. The story of the Bible is not one where the good people are saved and the bad people condemned. It's one where the only Good One is condemned in the place of all of the bad ones. The holy God of the universe call all of us bad ones to humble ourselves in repentance and faith. And when we do so, we find ourselves exalted.

A god who won't bring the wrongs of this world to account is not a good god. But our God does and will bring justice. What an amazing thing that he made a way to give justice *and* mercy. What an amazing thing that He will exalt sinners like us!

Lord, we praise you for your judgment. We praise you that you humble the proud and exalt the humble. Thank you for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. In Him we see the most glorious one humbling himself to death on a cross. We see Him exalted in His resurrection and ascension. Please help us to be a humble people. Amen.

James

Tuesday 14th July - Psalm 76

God is renowned in Judah;
in Israel his name is great.

2 His tent is in Salem,
his dwelling place in Zion.

3 There he broke the flashing arrows,
the shields and the swords, the weapons of war.

4 You are radiant with light,
more majestic than mountains rich with game.

5 The valiant lie plundered,
they sleep their last sleep;
not one of the warriors
can lift his hands.

6 At your rebuke, God of Jacob,
both horse and chariot lie still.

7 It is you alone who are to be feared.

Who can stand before you when you are angry?

8 From heaven you pronounced judgment,
and the land feared and was quiet—

9 when you, God, rose up to judge,
to save all the afflicted of the land.

10 Surely your wrath against mankind brings you praise,
and the survivors of your wrath are restrained.

11 Make vows to the Lord your God and fulfil them;
let all the neighbouring lands
bring gifts to the One to be feared.

12 He breaks the spirit of rulers;
he is feared by the kings of the earth.

It is easy to forget in our country that salvation is only possible because of a battle that was fought on our behalf. The Psalmist reminds us that God is enthroned in Zion, because he broke the flashing arrows and weapons of war (v3). God has defeated the warriors who opposed him. The glorious victory that is true for Christians is because God has made war against sin and death through Jesus Christ, who suffered and died to secure our victory. There is no liberation from bondage without breaking the chains that hold people. The grace of God and his judgement are two sides of the same coin of redemption. This Psalm reflects on the fact that God both saves his people and judges the world. We are reminded that God is not a localised being but the God of the whole world and all of God's acts are just and right - unlike ours (Rev 19:1-2). The greatest example of this reality is the death of Jesus.

Acts 2:23 says, "This man was handed over to you by God's foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross".

Heavenly Father, you are majestic and merciful, you are far above us yet ready to come to us. You have plans for the whole earth and yet you care for even the smallest details of our lives. You are our King and Father. Help our hearts to be in awe of you. Amen.

Martin

Wednesday 15th July - Psalm 77

- I cried out to God for help;
I cried out to God to hear me.
- 2 When I was in distress, I sought the Lord;
at night I stretched out untiring hands,
and I would not be comforted.
- 3 I remembered you, God, and I groaned;
I meditated, and my spirit grew faint.
- 4 You kept my eyes from closing;
I was too troubled to speak.
- 5 I thought about the former days,
the years of long ago;
- 6 I remembered my songs in the night.
My heart meditated and my spirit asked:
- 7 "Will the Lord reject forever?
Will he never show his favour again?
- 8 Has his unfailing love vanished forever?
Has his promise failed for all time?
- 9 Has God forgotten to be merciful?
Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"
- 10 Then I thought, "To this I will appeal:
the years when the Most High stretched out his right hand.
- 11 I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
- 12 I will consider all your works
and meditate on all your mighty deeds."
- 13 Your ways, God, are holy.
What god is as great as our God?
- 14 You are the God who performs miracles;
you display your power among the peoples.
- 15 With your mighty arm you redeemed your people
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.
- 16 The waters saw you, God,
the waters saw you and writhed;
the very depths were convulsed.
- 17 The clouds poured down water,
the heavens resounded with thunder;
your arrows flashed back and forth.
- 18 Your thunder was heard in the whirlwind,
your lightning lit up the world;
the earth trembled and quaked.
- 19 Your path led through the sea,
your way through the mighty waters,
though your footprints were not seen.
- 20 You led your people like a flock
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Have you ever found your experience of God exhausting? Where joy and praise escape your breath? My sister in law Kirsty, after losing her first son Ben, found little comfort in her church community. People were being very nice and generous, but words seemed to revolve around empty platitudes. But when she went to work, a fellow physio came up to her and said with tears in her eyes "that is 'fudging' horrible"...and she didn't say 'fudging'.

That word which grates against our ears became sweet to hers, because it described the pain as it was, not as the platitudes from church would pretend. As we see our writer's experience is of great grief and pain (1 – 9). We are invited in to sit with his pain and suffering and to feel his struggle. To be silent and say that this is horrible.

The psalmist knows that the reason for this pain comes from God (3 – 4), but also the comfort and the hope of restoration. Struggle and suffering comes as part of God's act of salvation.

But see where the struggle leads in the rest of the psalm. Consider where the psalmist goes with his pain. Kirsty would later reflect that God's word in the midst of the pain became sweet and was her own comfort. That like this psalm there is the certain hope in the God who intervenes. Who has intervened in the person of Jesus; who will lead us through the mighty waters, even when His footprints were not seen.

Thursday 16th July - Psalm 78 (first half)

My people, hear my teaching;
listen to the words of my mouth.
2 I will open my mouth with a parable;
I will utter hidden things, things from of old
—
3 things we have heard and known,
things our ancestors have told us.
4 We will not hide them from their
descendants;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
5 He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our ancestors
to teach their children,
6 so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.
7 Then they would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands.
8 They would not be like their ancestors—
a stubborn and rebellious generation,
whose hearts were not loyal to God,
whose spirits were not faithful to him.
9 The men of Ephraim, though armed with
bows,
turned back on the day of battle;
10 they did not keep God's covenant
and refused to live by his law.
11 They forgot what he had done,
the wonders he had shown them.
12 He did miracles in the sight of their
ancestors
in the land of Egypt, in the region of Zoan.
13 He divided the sea and led them through;
he made the water stand up like a wall.
14 He guided them with the cloud by day
and with light from the fire all night.
15 He split the rocks in the wilderness
and gave them water as abundant as the
seas;
16 he brought streams out of a rocky crag
and made water flow down like rivers.
17 But they continued to sin against him,
rebellious in the wilderness against the Most
High.
18 They willfully put God to the test
by demanding the food they craved.
19 They spoke against God;
they said, "Can God really
spread a table in the wilderness?
20 True, he struck the rock,
and water gushed out,
streams flowed abundantly,
but can he also give us bread?
Can he supply meat for his people?"
21 When the Lord heard them, he was furious;
his fire broke out against Jacob,
and his wrath rose against Israel,
22 for they did not believe in God
or trust in his deliverance.
23 Yet he gave a command to the skies above
and opened the doors of the heavens;
24 he rained down manna for the people to
eat,
he gave them the grain of heaven.
25 Human beings ate the bread of angels;
he sent them all the food they could eat.
26 He let loose the east wind from the
heavens
and by his power made the south wind
blow.
27 He rained meat down on them like dust,
birds like sand on the seashore.
28 He made them come down inside their
camp,
all around their tents.
29 They ate till they were gorged—
he had given them what they craved.
but the sea engulfed their enemies. 30 But
before they turned from what they craved,
even while the food was still in their
mouths,
31 God's anger rose against them;
he put to death the sturdiest among them,
cutting down the young men of Israel.
32 In spite of all this, they kept on sinning;
in spite of his wonders, they did not believe.
33 So he ended their days in futility
and their years in terror.
34 Whenever God slew them, they would
seek him;
they eagerly turned to him again.
35 They remembered that God was their
Rock,
that God Most High was their Redeemer.
36 But then they would flatter him with their
mouths,
lying to him with their tongues;
37 their hearts were not loyal to him,
they were not faithful to his covenant.
38 Yet he was merciful;
he forgave their iniquities
and did not destroy them.
Time after time he restrained his anger
and did not stir up his full wrath.
39 He remembered that they were but flesh,
a passing breeze that does not return.
40 How often they rebelled against him in the
wilderness
and grieved him in the wasteland!
41 Again and again they put God to the test;
they vexed the Holy One of Israel.
42 They did not remember his power—
the day he redeemed them from the
oppressor,
43 the day he displayed his signs in Egypt,
his wonders in the region of Zoan.
44 He turned their river into blood;
they could not drink from their streams.
45 He sent swarms of flies that devoured
them,
and frogs that devastated them.
46 He gave their crops to the grasshopper,
their produce to the locust.
47 He destroyed their vines with hail
and their sycamore-figs with sleet.
48 He gave over their cattle to the hail,
their livestock to bolts of lightning.
49 He unleashed against them his hot anger,
his wrath, indignation and hostility—
a band of destroying angels.
50 He prepared a path for his anger;
he did not spare them from death
but gave them over to the plague. 51 He
struck down all the firstborn of Egypt,
the first fruits of manhood in the tents of
Ham.
52 But he brought his people out like a flock;
he led them like sheep through the
wilderness.
53 He guided them safely, so they were
unafraid;
54 And so he brought them to the border of
his holy land,
to the hill country his right hand had taken.
55 He drove out nations before them
and allotted their lands to them as an
inheritance;
he settled the tribes of Israel in their homes.
56 But they put God to the test
and rebelled against the Most High;
they did not keep his statutes.
57 Like their ancestors they were disloyal and
faithless,
as unreliable as a faulty bow.
58 They angered him with their high places;
they aroused his jealousy with their idols.
59 When God heard them, he was furious;
he rejected Israel completely.
60 He abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh,
the tent he had set up among humans.
61 He sent the ark of his might into captivity,
his splendour into the hands of the enemy.
62 He gave his people over to the sword;
he was furious with his inheritance.
63 Fire consumed their young men,
and their young women had no wedding
songs;
64 their priests were put to the sword,
and their widows could not weep.
65 Then the Lord awoke as from sleep,
as a warrior wakes from the stupor of wine.
66 He beat back his enemies;
he put them to everlasting shame.
67 Then he rejected the tents of Joseph,
he did not choose the tribe of Ephraim;
68 but he chose the tribe of Judah,
Mount Zion, which he loved.
69 He built his sanctuary like the heights,
like the earth that he established forever.
70 He chose David his servant
and took him from the sheep pens;
71 from tending the sheep he brought him
to be the shepherd of his people Jacob,
of Israel his inheritance.
72 And David shepherded them with integrity
of heart;
with skilful hands he led them.

PSALM 78 (first half)

The writer of Psalm 78 comments on events in the history of Israel, so that people of a future generation might take stock of their lives, and draw strength from the experience of their forebears. The stories of God's faithfulness serve as an encouragement, and the stories of human disobedience and failure act as a warning.

The first historical reminder concerns the reluctance of the tribe of Ephraim to engage in battle. The writer does not specify any particular battle, but emphasizes Ephraim's failure "to keep God's covenant and walk according to his law" v.10. By contrast God demonstrates his faithfulness by constantly doing the right thing for his people v.12. The psalmist highlights God's power and might in making a way for Israel to be freed from slavery in Egypt v.13. But as soon as the people begin to experience the hardship of life in the wilderness they start complaining bitterly v.17-19. They even mock God, challenging him to prove his capacity to provide for them in the wilderness v.20. God again demonstrates his faithfulness in graciously providing for them, but the time their sinful attitude becomes the grounds for divine judgment v.30-31.

The apostle Paul reminds us of the efficacy of God's word: "*For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope and overflow with confidence in His promises.*" Rom 15:4

Father God, we thank you for the vital lessons we learn from our own mistakes, and the mistakes of our spiritual ancestors. Only you can incline our hearts and minds to heed your word and to do your will. Thank you that when our lives were far from God, you demonstrated your love by sending the Saviour.

John

Friday 17th July - Psalm 78 (second half)

This second half of Psalm 78 begins with the phrase 'In spite of all this'. This phrase connotes what God has done so far in His great kindness and mercy to the rebellious Israel in the first half of this chapter. In spite of all this, after Israel had suffered enough from their ingratitude, they should have learned the lesson of faith and obedience to God. Unfortunately, they had not learned but they continue in sin and in unbelief (v 32). Hence God determined that they would not enter the land of Canaan but would spend their days in futility (v 33).

But God did not abandon them. He continues to deal with Israel's unfaithfulness to remind them of who He is; that He is their Rock and their Redeemer (v. 34-35). With great patience, God have mercy on them and forgave their iniquities even though again and again they put God to the test (v. 41,56). Time after time God restrained his anger not to destroy them and He remembered that they were but flesh (v.38-39). How is God dealing with you to show who he is in your life so you can wholeheartedly trust and follow him faithfully?

The rest of the chapter tells us about God's faithfulness and Israel's continued unfaithfulness (v. 40-55). Israel's sins during the period of the judges (v.56-64), God's victory over Israel's enemies (v.65-66), and finally God's choice of Judah to raise up David in shepherding his people with integrity of heart (v. 67-72).

In God's final struggle with man's unfaithful heart is the heart of a good shepherd. "I am the Good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). A good shepherd leads his sheep to the path of righteousness for his name sake. It was the death of our Good Shepherd that redeemed us from sin, made us righteous before God and gave us eternal life. Jesus is the ultimate answer to man's unfaithful heart. Trust and follow him for he is gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:29).

Lord, may we hear your voice as a sheep knows the voice of their shepherd. And we hear you speaking, soften our hearts to obey your voice.

Edwin