

Joy in God's Great Reversals

Psalm 75:1-10

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Psalm 75 as we continue our way through the Book of the Psalms. Last Lord's Day evening we were together in Psalm 74, and it was a Psalm that in part lifted up a plaintive cry to God to vindicate His oppressed people. It featured the Psalmist looking around him and seeing those who were arrogant, prideful, rejecters of God, prospering and even ruling cruelly over the people of God, and that Psalm ends with a cry to God in verse 22:

“Do arise, O God, and plead Thine own cause; Remember how the foolish man reproaches Thee all day long. Do not forget the voice of Thine adversaries, the uproar of those who rise against Thee which ascends continually.”

And so though, as we saw in our study of the Psalm, the Psalmist is fully confident in God's justice in Psalm 74, he is confronted with and baffled by to a certain extent this ascendancy of the wicked...this exercise of cruel rule over the people of God. The great disaster of Psalm 74 is the disaster of the Babylonians, this wicked people that God has brought in judgment upon His own people, and this is confusing to the Psalmist.

But all of that confusion is gone when you come to Psalm 75. The very same circumstances are contemplated from a completely different direction, from a completely different posture with a completely different attitude. The troubles are just as real, but the attitude is completely changed. And we can surmise that the reason for this is that the confidence that the Psalmist exudes in Psalm 75 in God's providential rule over the world. The very thought of God's just rule causes the Psalmist to lift up his voice in praise and thanksgiving and worship to God, and so tonight as we study this Psalm, I want you to see four parts as we move through it.

First, in verse 1, you will see the Psalmist praise the God who has drawn near to His people and revealed His character in His name. And we're going to see particularly, as we look at that verse, the Psalmist indicate that our remembering who God is and what He has done, and our hearing of the stories of God's wondrous deeds retold in the context of worship, are absolutely essential to our

approaching these inexplicable providences of life and being able to respond to those inexplicable providences of life with praise and thanksgiving, and confidence and worship. And so we'll see that in verse 1.

Then if you'll look at verses 2-5, in that section of the Psalm God Himself is speaking. The Psalmist has introduced the praise of the people of God to God in verse 1, but then in verses 2-5, God Himself speaks, and He speaks a word both of encouragement and of warning, and He speaks about His rule over the world. That's the second section of the Psalm.

And thirdly, if you'll look at verses 6-8, you'll see the response of the people of God to the announcement of God of His rule, and it is praise to God who is the Judge.

And then finally, verses 9 and 10, we see the fourth section of the Psalm, in which thanksgiving is given to our God, the God of Jacob, forever.

We'll look at these four parts of this great Psalm together tonight. Before we read God's word and hear it explained and expounded, let's look to Him in prayer and ask for His help and blessing.

God, this is Your word. We thank You for it. You nourish us by this word, and tonight in particular as we look at a Psalm that contemplates the wicked who are in the world and the righteous who are in the world, the prideful who are in the world and the humble who are in the world, those who oppress Your people and those who are Your people oppressed, and it looks at that world and it contemplates Your justice, we pray, O God, that You would give us a heart to see the world as we ought to see it: that even in the confusion of this fallen and sinful world filled with pain and suffering, we pray that we would look at it rightly, remembering Your sovereignty, remembering Your rule, and that we would take comfort from this, that we would respond to our trials with grace and trust, and that we would bear witness to the truth that there is a God and He is coming to aid His people. Bless us now as we study this Your word. And we ask our prayers in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear God's word.

For the choir director; set to Al-tashheth. A Psalm of Asaph, a Song.
We give thanks to Thee, O God, we give thanks, for Thy name is near;
Men declare Thy wondrous works.
When I select an appointed time, it is I who judge with equity.
The earth and all who dwell in it melt;
It is I who have firmly set its pillars.
I said to the boastful, "Do not boast,"
And to the wicked, "Do not lift up the horn;
Do not lift up your horn on high,

Do not speak with insolent pride.”
For not from the east, nor from the west,
Nor from the desert comes exaltation;
But God is the Judge; He puts down one, and exalts another.
For a cup is in the hand of the Lord, and the wine foams;
It is well mixed, and He pours out of this;
Surely all the wicked of the earth must drain and drink down its dregs.
But as for me, I will declare it forever,
I will sing praises to the God of Jacob.
And all the horns of the wicked He will cut off,
But the horns of the righteous will be lifted up.

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

In medieval times, even in Christendom, there was a pagan idea that seeped into the outlook and attitude, into the beliefs, into the worldview of many of the occupants of medieval Europe. It was in their songs, it was in their literature: the idea of *fate* — fate ruling the world, so that at one moment a king was exalted and the next moment he was brought down — a wheel of fate in operation. But once the king was at the top of that wheel, but as it rolls and as time moved on, he was brought low and to the bottom of that wheel. It was not a comforting thought to medievals. For medievals, it was a world that didn't make sense, that was cruel and completely out of their control, so that their success would be short-lived and that disaster was soon to come after.

It is interesting in this Psalm to see the Psalmist looking at the same phenomenon of the great being abased and the humble being exalted, and drawing exactly the opposite conclusion from those medievals who believed in fate's control of the world. For the believer, looking at the exalted being humbled and the humble being exalted leads to praise! Why? Because the believer believes in a personal, just, wise, good, righteous, loving creator-God who is ruling the world; and everything He does, He does for a purpose; and everything He does ultimately will work for the good of those who are called according to His purpose, those who love Him because He first loved them.

And so the Psalmist unfolds this scene of God's judgment on the exalted, right on the heels of Psalm 74. He's been crying out, 'Lord God, the Babylonians have crushed Your people! These wicked, godless people have destroyed Your temple. O God, plead Your own cause, rise up and judge the world.' And here in Psalm 75 he is contemplating God's judgment on the exalted, His humbling of them, and His exalting of those who are humbled. Let's look at the four parts together.

I. Praise God who is near.

The Psalm begins with praise: praise for a God who is near. “We give thanks to You, O God, we give thanks...” Why? “...for Your name is near; men declare Your wondrous works.”

Our world, just like the medieval world that we have described, our world is filled with practical atheism, not outright denials that God exists. Even the *USA Today* polls taken on a regular basis in recent times show that most people still — in fact, overwhelmingly most people still believe in God. It's just that they don't live like He exists. It's just that their attitude and outlook on the world is as if He did not exist. It's just that they don't trust and live as if there were a God. So the world is full of practical atheism. Few men really believe that God is and governs the world, that everything happens by His ordering, and that all the causes and agents and means that we see in the world are nothing without Him. But the Psalmist has been brought to praise in the very first verse of this Psalm because of that truth. Even with the backdrop of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple emblazoned upon his eyes and on his heart, he is able to praise, and he tells us he is able to praise God because of two things. Notice what they are.

“For Your name is near.” Now, you know that God's name is something very, very special in the word of God. It is something that reveals His character. You remember, for instance, when Moses is going to go to the people of God as God's representative to the people and as the God-appointed leader for the children of Israel to bring them out of slavery and out of the land of Egypt, he asked God what name — Who should I tell them, what God has sent me to them? It's very important that Moses identify the God who has sent him as the leader of God's people as the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and God's name reminds the people of God that this God is the same God who made the promises to Abraham, and promises to Isaac, and promises to Jacob, whose family came down into Egypt. And this God who promised in Genesis 15 that they would go down into Egypt and that they would come out is sending Moses again. And so the people of God learned something about God by His name: ‘Oh, yes! That's the God who makes promises and that's the God who made promises to Abraham to bring us out of this place.’ And so God draws near to them by revealing something of His character to them in His name.

That's why His name *Yahweh* given to Moses is so significant. He's not dependent on anything: I AM THAT I AM. He's the self-existent One. Everything else depends on Him. He Himself depends on nothing, for He is the first of all, and all things exist by the word of His power, and He brought them into being by speaking them into existence. And so the names of God tell you something about God's character, what He's like.

And the Psalmist reminds us that by God's very revelation in His word heard in worship the people of God remember what God is like. And what does it enable them to do? It enables them to look at the destruction of Jerusalem from a very,

very different perspective. Instead of people who are victims of blind fate, of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, suddenly they remember 'Lord, You've revealed who You are in Your word to me. You've drawn near, and as I've gathered with the people of God I've heard that word read, and I've heard that word proclaimed, and I've heard that word sung, and I've heard that word prayed, and I know that even though the world looks like it's crazy and out of control, that You are God and You are in charge.' And so his hearing the name of the Lord in the worship of the people of God enables him to have a very different outlook on the destruction of Israel.

Secondly, notice what he goes on to say in verse 1: "Men declare Your wondrous works." What's happening there? It's not just that he hears the name of the Lord read from His word, His character explained in the exposition of that word in the worship of the people of God, but that he actually in that public assembly of worship hears God's wondrous works being praised in the songs of the people of God. In other words, God's wondrous works are being retold in the songs and in the praises of the people of God who are gathered there to worship, and as he hears that it enables him to worship.

The Psalmist is telling us that the praise and worship of the people of God, in their retelling of the wondrous works of God and the remembrance of who God is as He reveals Himself in the word, prompted his thanksgiving to God. It was when he remembered who God is; it was when he heard the wondrous acts of God retold in the worship of God that his outlook on the world was reoriented.

Doesn't that tell us something of the importance of gathering together Lord's Day after Lord's Day? Because all during the week there are things that occur in our lives that are susceptible to very different interpretations than that which we hear from God's word. We are tempted to doubt, we are tempted to wonder, we are tempted to question, we're tempted to bitterness; and the Psalmist is saying 'It's in the context of the worship of God where I hear God reveal who He really is, in His name, in His word, and when I hear others stand and confess the wonders of the Lord then I am strengthened to thank God instead of to doubt God; then I am strengthened to praise God rather than to question God; I am strengthened to worship the Lord rather than to scramble for cover.'

It's this retelling of who God is and what He has done in this worshipping of God in the exposition of who He is - His name, in the worship of the people of God - that strengthens this man to face this cataclysmic crisis in the history of Israel. And so we see praise for a God who is near: His character, His deeds are praised as they are heard and retold in the worship of God. That's the first thing we see in this Psalm.

II. God speaks in comfort and in warning.

The second this is this. Look at verses 2-5. God now speaks, and God speaks in comfort and in warning. And notice what He tells us here. God's speech in verses 2 and 3 is encouraging, it's reassuring to the people of God: "When I select an appointed time, it is I who will judge with equity." God is saying 'I'm the One who will choose the time for judgment, and when I judge, I will judge with righteousness; I will judge with justice; I will judge with equity, with fairness.'

That's an amazing statement by God. It's a comforting statement by God to His people. In fact, this statement goes far beyond God simply as Judge. It reminds us of God as ruler. Notice that God as Judge will select the time for judgment, and think about how in the Old Testament it is God that ordered the time of His people. He ordered the time of His people in appointing specific great feasts at particular times of the year. And think of it, my friends: His appointment of those great feasts will in the end dictate the times of the birth, the death, the resurrection, and the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. God is Sovereign over time, and not only does He select the appointed time of the judgment, but in the Old Testament the appointed times, the set times, that He put into the rhythm of the life of the people of God came to bear in the life of the Messiah, His Son, as He came into the world to live on our behalf, to die on our behalf, to be raised again and to ascend on high on our behalf. This God is sovereign. He sets the appointed time.

III. We praise God for His just judgment.

And then, when He judges, He judges with equity. He is a Judge who dispenses justice with fairness, so that the wicked are judged and the righteous are acquitted. And notice again, He goes on to say "The earth and all who dwell in it melt; it is I who have firmly set its pillars." Again we are told here that though those who view themselves as the pillars of society melt away, it is God who has established the pillars of the earth. Though this earth seems with its inhabitants and cultures to be going crazy, yet God has established the structure and the order of this world, and He will administer justice.

As we look at the events in New Orleans in the last six weeks, as we look at the events in Toledo in the last couple of days, as we look at what has been happening in India and Kashmir and in other parts of the world, in the midst of the unsettling of the world whether through natural disaster or some unexpected calamity in human events, we look at those things and we say 'Where is the justice in this? We don't see the justice in the hooliganism of Toledo; we don't see the justice in the depraved situation in the wake of Katrina in New Orleans; we don't see the justice in the things that are happening in Kashmir; and yet, God is saying 'I am God; I have set the pillars of the earth. And even though the inhabitants of the earth melt away and their cultures at some points come to the point where you wonder whether there is any vestige of justice left, yet I will judge with equity.' There is good news for the people of God, that justice will be

done, that God will set things to rights.

But now there's the warning side. You see it in verses 4 and 5. "I said to the boastful, 'Do not boast,' and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up the horn; do not lift up your horn on high, do not speak with insolent pride.'"

The Lord here speaks to the proud and to the wicked, and notice how He links those together — the proud and the wicked. To be prideful is to be wicked; to be wicked is to be prideful. And He says to them, 'Do not be arrogant. Do not speak arrogantly.' God is announcing here in these words of comfort and of warning that He orders time, that He will judge with fairness and with justice, that He establishes the just foundations of this world, and that He will judge the prideful and wicked.

My friends, that's one reason why humility is the quintessential Christian grace, why it's so important for all of us to cultivate that humility; for God will exalt the humble, and He will abase the proud. To be prideful is to be raised up against God. May God grant to us as a congregation humility: grace-wrought, gospel humility.

Well, the Psalmist goes on. In verses 6-8 he responds to God's speech, to God's announcement, and he responds with praise. He praises God for this just judgment in which He exalts the righteous and the humble and abases the wicked and the proud.

Notice how he begins: "Not from the east, nor from the west, nor from the desert comes exaltation; but God is the Judge; He puts down one, and exalts another."

Now several things strike us when we read those words. The first thing that strikes us here is this praise to God as the one who in His governing of the world exalts the humble and humbles the exalted. What's that sound like? Well, it sounds like Hannah's song; it sounds like Mary's song. Take your Bibles and turn with me to I Samuel:2. Now, Hannah's song runs from verse 1 all the way down to verse 10, but let me draw your attention especially to verse 3 and then to verses 6-8:

"Boast no more so very proudly, do not let arrogance come out of your mouth; For the Lord is a God of knowledge, and with Him actions are weighed."

[Now verses 6-8.]

The Lord kills and makes alive;
He brings down to Sheol and raises up.
The Lord makes poor and rich;
He brings low, He also exalts.
He raises the poor from the dust,

He lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with nobles,
and inherit a seat of honor;
for the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and He has set the world on
them.

It's almost as if the Psalmist has Hannah's song in his mind as he writes these words. And Mary, if you'll turn with me to Luke 1, certainly has Hannah's song on her mind when she sings what we call *The Magnificat*. Now, again, that song runs from Luke 1:46 all the way down to 55, but let me draw your attention especially to verses 51-53. She says of the Lord,

He has done mighty deeds with His arm;
He has scattered those who were proud in the thoughts of their heart.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones,
And has exalted those who were humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things;
And sent away the rich empty-handed.

Here the Psalmist, after hearing God announce His just judgment, instead of standing back and saying 'Well, God, how could You have let the wicked Babylonians bring judgment on Your people and destroy Your temple?' responds by saying 'Lord, I know You're going to bring the wicked down. I know the prideful who set up their own banners in the temple of God, even though they're Your instruments to bring just judgment against Your sinful people and to drive us back to You in trust and in dependence, I know that You're going to bring them low. You're going to abase them; You're going to judge them, because I know that You rule the world in righteousness.'

And when he says, "Not from the east, nor from the west, nor from the desert comes exaltation," he means this: You can go as far as to the place where the sun rises, and you can go as far as to the place where the sun sets, and you can go out in the deepest part of the wilderness, and you will not find there the place that things will be put right for the people of God. There's only one place where you can go where things will be put right for the people of God, and that's to God the just Judge. That's the One who's going to come and exalt you in your abasement and humility. That's the One who is going to come and set things right. Search where you will, but there is no Arbiter but God: He alone exalts the humble; He alone abases the proud.

What a different outlook this is from that fatalistic conception of the medieval wheel of fortune! Some of you have heard Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, or at least you've heard a part of it. If you've been to movies sometime in the last 25 years, you've at least heard the opening song of the *Carmina Burana*, 'O Fortuna'. It's a song about this principle of faith, and it goes like this:

O Fortune, like the moon you are changeable,

Ever waxing and waning;
Hateful light! It first oppresses
And then soothes, as fancy takes it.
Poverty and power, it melts them like ice;
Fate, monstrous and empty,
You whirling wheel, you are malevolent.
Well-being is vain, and always fades to nothing.
Shadowed and veiled, you plague me, too;
Now through the game I bring
My bare back to your villainy.
Fate is against me in health and virtue;
Driven on and weighted down, always enslaved;
So this hour without delay pluck the vibrating strings,
Since fate strikes down the strong man.
Everyone weep with me.

And then the second movement goes on to sing:

I bemoan the wounds of Fortune with weeping eyes,
For the gifts she made me, she perversely takes away.
It is written in truth that she has a fine head of hair,
But when it comes to seizing an opportunity,
She is bald.
On Fortune's throne, I used to sit raised up,
Crowned with many colored flowers of prosperity.
Though I may have flourished, happy and blessed,
Now I fall from the peak, deprived of glory.
The wheel of fortune turns; I go down, demeaned.
Another is raised up;
Far too high up sits the king at the summit.
Let him fear ruin, for under the axis is written,
"Queen Hecuba."

Now, you remember Queen Hecuba. She was the wife of the King of Troy, and she was given to Odysseus after the war, and she was transformed into a dog. The point is that she was exalted and then she was abased.

And this is the picture of the worldview via the view of fate. What a totally opposite view here, in which God is praised because He puts up one and brings down another. This is no "fate"; this is no impersonal force in the universe blindly inflicting pain on one and one time and blessing at another time, and then reversing those forces. No, this is the God, the personal God who with justice and fairness and equity rules the world and brings to bear His judgment on the wicked.

IV. Thanksgiving for our God, Jacob's God.

And what does this evoke from the Psalmist? Well, this is the fourth thing we see, and we see it in verses 9-10: Thanksgiving - thanksgiving for our God, Jacob's God. Listen to what he says:

“But as for me, I will declare it forever,
I will sing praises to the God of Jacob.
And all the horns of the wicked He will cut off,
But the horns of the righteous will be lifted up.”

When the Psalmist contemplates the certainty of God's judgment against the wicked, he praises God. But notice especially what He calls God: “I will sing praises to the God of Jacob.” Now, why is that so significant? Because he is remembering the promises that God made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: that He would make Jacob's family, all those who trusted in Him in the line of Abraham, whether they be Jew or Gentile, slave or free, that He would be their God and they would be His people; and that He would make them a people, and that He would give them a permanent dwelling place, and that He would grant them an inheritance, and that He would be their inheritance; and, therefore, this argument is the most conclusive argument that a believer can possibly hear: that the God who is our God is the same God who promised to Abraham and to Jacob, who sustained Daniel, who heard Paul, who was there with John at the very end — that God is our God. And so in the midst of all of the world's crises, we continue to believe in His just judgment because He has drawn near to us, He has revealed His name and character, and He has shown us His wondrous works, and we hear the people of God in all generations singing praises to Him for those wondrous works.

Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank You for Your word, and we pray that we would learn to read providence by Your word, so that our interpretation is not based upon our errant speculation on what You are doing in our lives or in the world, but is based on the certain revelation of who You are and what You have done, and what You have promised to us. And so, O God, enable us to respond to every dark providence, every inscrutable event, with faith and with praise. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Would you stand for God's blessing.

Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord, until the day break and the shadows flee away. Amen.

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