The Glory of God's Wrath

Psalm 75

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Raising children is a fun experience for a lot of reasons. You get a front-row seat to watch a tiny person grow into a full-grown human being. From the earliest days, you begin to get a glimpse of how each person is unique. Long before children begin to speak, you already see some of their character traits. And as children grow, those traits begin to blossom and take on their fullness.

Of course, not all traits are easy or fun. I've often heard parents who describe a strong-willed child and say, my child is incredibly difficult, but they've got great potential. One day, they'll either be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or they're going to run a prison gang. The jury's still out on which direction they'll go!

My oldest daughter, Grace, shares much of her personality and aptitudes with me. I've often told her, you got these traits from me…you're welcome…and I'm sorry. We all have traits that can be a blessing or a liability depending on how they're used.

The same is true of God. Some of His character traits are difficult for us to deal with. We know that God doesn't have character flaws, but some traits still aren't easy for us to swallow. Probably chief among those traits is His wrath. The wrath of God is a concept that makes us uneasy, so we like to downplay it. We imagine that God is like us, and when we talk about our wrath, it is almost always a bad thing. But God is not like us, and neither is His wrath.

This morning, as we look at Psalm 75, we're going to see that this Psalm seems to celebrate the wrath of God. Because of that, I think it's worth taking some time to examine what exactly the psalmist celebrates and why. As we begin to see the glory of God's wrath, my hope is that we will be driven further into worship and submission.

Praise for Who God Is

Asaph begins our psalm with a declaration of praise for God's character.

> [1] We thank you, O God! We give thanks because you are near. People everywhere tell of your wonderful deeds. [2] God says, "At the time I have planned, I will bring justice against the wicked. [3] When the earth quakes and its people live in turmoil, I am the one who keeps its foundations firm. (Psalm 75:1-3, NLT)

There are several elements of God's character that Asaph praises. **First, is that God is near.** This is an important element we sometimes forget. Sometimes we imagine that God is far off and does not see us or care about us. But the scriptures tell a different story. They remind us that the Lord is present with us and actively engaged in our world. Given what Asaph had written in Psalm 74, we can see why this would be a tremendous comfort. Even in the times of trial and judgment, times when all hope seemed lost, it was a reminder that God had not abandoned His people, and He was near.

This is something we must remember today as well. We are never left to face the circumstances of our lives alone and in our own strength. Things are never out of control. We are never outside of the view or care of our Lord. He is near. This is a wonderful reason to praise.

Second, people everywhere see His deeds. All the surrounding nations understood the power of Israel's God. There was absolutely no reason for Israel to be the powerful nation it was. God consistently told them that He had not chosen them for their power, but rather for the fact that when they succeeded the only reasonable explanation could be that God had done it!

We must strive to recognize God's power and activity all around us. We should draw attention not to our successes, but to the ways the Lord enabled them. We should constantly keep an eye out for God's deeds and then help others to see them as well. As we see God's action, we are reminded He is near.

Third, God will punish the wicked. If this was written around the same time as Psalm 74, shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem, this would be a tremendous source of comfort, because it would be a reminder that even though evil rulers had appeared to be victorious, the story wasn't over yet. God will not allow the evil to escape unharmed. They will ultimately be punished for their sin.

Finally, God is the source of stability. God says here that even when the earth quakes and when people live in turmoil, He keeps the foundations of the earth firm. We see instability all around us. We often feel like the world is hurtling down a path that is unstoppable. We feel less stable than ever. But the Lord reminds us that our confidence, hope, and focus should not be on the instability around us, but on the One who anchors all things. When we look to Him, we find stability, even in the most tumultuous of times.

A Warning to Those Who Hear

The next section of the psalm contains a warning.

> 4 "I warned the proud, 'Stop your boasting!' I told the wicked, 'Don't raise your
> fists! 5 Don't raise your fists in defiance at the heavens or speak with such
> arrogance.' " 6 For no one on earth—from east or west, or even from the
> wilderness— should raise a defiant fist. 7 It is God alone who judges; he decides
> who will rise and who will fall. 8 For the Lord holds a cup in his hand that is full of
> foaming wine mixed with spices. He pours out the wine in judgment, and all the
> wicked must drink it, draining it to the dregs. (Psalm 75:4-8, NLT)

Asaph warns several groups in this section. **The first group is the proud.** Proud people believe they know better than everyone else. They find their assurance in their own abilities. Proud people have no need for God.

We see this increasingly in our world today. Many today imagine they don't need God's help for anything, and most believe they know better than He does. There is an arrogance in our world that says that we are more enlightened than the ancient peoples, and therefore we have moved beyond books like the Bible that tell us how to live. Asaph reminds us that the proud will be humbled and face judgment.

The second group is the wicked. Wicked people are those who know what God has said to do but do the opposite. Again, this is an incredibly common trait of our current day. Probably the biggest area we see this is in regard to sexual ethics. As a society we have rejected God's instructions about how He has designed sex to work, and we have instead chosen to go down our own path. We see this attitude even creeping increasingly into our churches!

But sex is not the only place we see this, we also see it in the way we talk to others, the way we handle money, the way we organize our time, and the things we choose to watch or listen to. Asaph warns those who know what God says to do but choose to go their own way instead of stop!

The third group he warns is the defiant. Defiance is similar to wickedness, but it includes an element of stubborn and arrogant refusal. Defiant people clap their hands over their ears because they don't want to hear what God has to say and just continue going in their own path.

Of course, you don't have to physically put your hands over your ears to be defiant. Jesus often said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." In other words, not everyone who hears His words is willing to listen.

This should be a stern warning to those of us who sit in churches, hearing God's word preached. We can outwardly appear to be obedient to the Lord while inwardly choosing to be defiant, refusing to heed the truth we see contained in God's Word. It makes me think of a story I've told before, of a parent trying to strap their young child into their car seat. The child stiffened their legs and tried to stand. The parent kept telling them they couldn't stand and needed to be strapped into the seat, but the child kept arguing. Eventually, the parent succeeded in getting the child restrained and breathed a sigh of relief. Then the child declared, "I may be sitting on the outside, but I'm standing on the inside!" We can easily be defiant, sitting on the outside, but inwardly still standing.

After warning about these specific character traits, Asaph reminds us of why we should listen to him. He first reminds us that God alone who judges. In other words, the Lord determines who is right and who is wrong. The way we view things is irrelevant, because the Lord will judge on His own.

In other words, just because we think we are right, it does not mean we are. God will judge correctly, and our opinion is irrelevant. This is a call to humility and submission to God's judgment, recognizing that He, not us, is the final authority. If our judgments do not match His, we are the ones who are wrong!

The last part of this section focuses on God's wrath. Asaph calls people to change course because God will judge sin. The picture he uses is a foaming glass of wine, indicating that God's wrath overflows onto the guilty. And Asaph says the wicked must drink this foaming cup of God's wrath completely.

This image of God's wrath being poured out or having to drink it to its dregs (the last drop) is used often in scripture. The point of it is that no one will escape God's judgment. Every evil deed, every evil thought, every evil word will be judged and punished appropriately.

There is an increasing notion in our world today that God will not punish sin. Several famous Christian writers and speakers have tried to argue that God will ultimately forgive everyone for their sins and therefore deny the doctrine of hell. They do so because they find the doctrine of God punishing people to be evil, overly harsh, and unloving. So they conclude this must not be part of God's character.

Notice that the psalmist does not seem sickened by God's judgment, he seems encouraged by it! He had just seen the wicked destroy the city of Jerusalem. He had seen God's temple destroyed, its riches carted off, and the city left to sit in ruins. The knowledge that evil people will not get away with their sins was a great source of encouragement to him.

This should be true for us today too. We see billionaires who are continuing to amass wealth by exploiting everyone else, and we are sickened. We see people who lie, cheat, and steal who manage to advance in their careers ahead of us. We see people living in rebellion to God who appear to be enjoying life to the fullest, and we feel like that just isn't fair. And it isn't! But the doctrine of God's justice and judgment reminds us that though people seem to be getting away with things for a time, they will not escape judgment forever. God will judge every person for what they have done.

Sometimes that judgment happens in this life. It happened to the Assyrians and Babylonians, who attacked Israel and Judah. After God used them to judge His people, He destroyed them, bringing His judgment to bear in their lives.

But God's judgment is not limited to this life. Those who seem to escape judgment here and now will not escape it in eternity. And the evil things that no one else knows about, God sees and will judge. The Bible is clear that each person will stand account for every evil thing they've done, and they will bear the punishment they deserve.

This is the doctrine of hell. The Bible teaches that hell is a place of eternal torment. The language used to describe hell are things like flames, screaming, darkness, and burning sulfur. I don't know if these are literal descriptions or if they're just the best things the biblical writers could come up with to describe the horror of hell. Either way, it does not sound like a place anyone would want to be.

Since God will withdraw His hand of blessing in hell, all the things we enjoy will also be gone. I hear people say things like, “Well I know I’m going to hell, but at least that’s where all my friends will be.” They grossly misunderstand what hell is all about. Friendship is a blessing from God. It will be gone. Every good thing is a blessing from God, and those things will be absent. We also forget that in this life, God restrains evil. He does not allow us to become as evil as we possibly could. That will not be the case in hell. Imagine a place where every person gives full vent to all the evil deeds within them. It sounds like an awful place—and that’s because it is.

Asaph says that rather than being a reason to curse God, His judgment is a reason to celebrate Him. Hell is not unjust. It is exactly what we deserve. God will not let the guilty go unpunished. He will ensure justice for all. We are uncomfortable with that, because in the depths of our hearts, we know we deserve this judgment as well. And that makes us exceedingly uncomfortable.

The Response

Asaph concludes this psalm that celebrates God’s justice and judgment by talking about how he will respond to the Lord based on these truths.

> [9] But as for me, I will always proclaim what God has done; I will sing praises to the God of Jacob. [10] For God says, “I will break the strength of the wicked, but I will increase the power of the godly.” (Psalm 75:9-10, NLT)

Asaph does not run from the Lord because of His judgment but runs to Him. He says he will praise God for who He is, recognizing that God will punish the wicked and care for the godly.

Let’s be clear, the Bible does not teach us that if we do enough good things we will escape God’s judgment. Even though this psalm was written before the time of Jesus, Asaph understood that the only hope to be spared the judgment we deserve was for the Lord to provide the means of forgiveness. The sacrifices the Jewish people offered were intended to drive this point home in a very vivid way.

We have much more of God’s plan revealed to us now. We know Jesus came into the world to save sinners. He bore the wrath we deserve. God does not overlook sin, but He has provided a means for our sin to be paid for, and He calls us to embrace that means for ourselves.

So, my hope today is that you will respond like Asaph as you look at God’s wrath—you will see your need for a Savior and run to the Lord for refuge. Jesus calls us to follow Him, to trust Him, and He will provide the forgiveness we need. Genuine faith requires us to abandon our own way of looking at the world and follow God’s. It demands a change in direction. But that kind of faith and trust ensures that we will be forgiven by a God who demands justice but also provides mercy and grace.

Conclusion

I realize it may seem strange to spend an entire message talking about the wonder of God's wrath, but I hope you can see that this is an important truth we must grasp if we want to appreciate the wonder of the gospel. So I've got some concluding lessons we can take from this passage.

First, there is an urgency to faith. Many people think religion is primarily about ascribing to a list of rules or a code of conduct. I've heard many tell me that all religions basically teach the same thing, so it doesn't really matter what you believe. I've heard others tell me they're moral people, so they don't need religion. These people are missing the point of the Christian faith! Yes, Christianity calls us to live differently. It calls us to put to death the evil desires in our hearts and to follow Christ, but that is not the central message of the Christian faith. The central message is this: apart from Jesus, you will spend eternity bearing the judgment you rightly deserve! But God has also provided a means of forgiveness—Jesus Christ. As we talk to others, we should recognize the stakes. Those who reject Christ are not just making an unwise decision for this life; they are setting themselves up to bear God's just wrath for all eternity! This truth should give us an urgency in our own faith and in sharing it with others.

Second, we see the beauty of grace. When we recognize that God's wrath is not a character flaw, but a just response to sinful, disobedient, and defiant people, then we also recognize how wonderful it is that He also extends grace to us. God did not have to provide a means of salvation. He would have been perfectly within His rights to punish our sin for all eternity, because that's what we deserve. But He didn't leave things there. He provided a means of forgiveness. That means was not to pretend like sin doesn't exist, but to pour out His righteous punishment on Jesus. When we see God's wrath alongside His grace, we are left in awe, and it should rightly lead us to praise.

Finally, it gives hope in the face of rampant wickedness. We are often frustrated when we feel like the wicked are succeeding and the righteous are being oppressed. Many disbelieve God because they say following God doesn't get you anything. Sometimes even as Christians we begin to question whether God's way really is better. But we must look with an eternal perspective. Just because the wicked haven't been punished yet doesn't mean they won't. And even if judgment doesn't happen in this life, we are assured that it will happen in the next. Hold onto the truth that the Lord will ensure justice in the end, and you'll find confidence no matter how much the wicked seem to prosper.

Just as there are character traits we sometimes don't understand or fully appreciate in our children, the same is true of God. And just like with our children, those traits can ultimately accomplish tremendous good. God's wrath isn't a character flaw, it's the natural consequence of His justice. When we rightly understand God's justice and judgment, we can also rightly understand His grace and mercy. The truth of God's wrath points us to the glory of the gospel, but also the reminds us of the stakes. Evil will be punished. That can be a comfort or a terror, so submit to Him and seek His grace today.

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