

Introduction

On Wednesday, November 23 the Supreme Court of the United States of America handed down a decision that was a victory for religious liberty in our nation. By a vote of 5-4, the court ruled unconstitutional restrictions imposed upon religious services in New York by Governor Andrew Cuomo. He had classified religious services as non-essential and placed incredible limitations on meeting size while allowing for no restrictions upon businesses deemed essential. Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote, "Government is not free to disregard the First Amendment in times of crisis. At a minimum, that Amendment prohibits government officials from treating religious exercises worse than comparable secular activities."

I am thankful for the victory, but there is a side to the ruling which nevertheless is disappointing. Sadly, the case arrived in the Supreme Court after losing a number of appeals in the lower level courts. Also, sadly, the decision was 5-4. At our nation's founding it would never have made it to the Supreme Court and if it had, the ruling would have been 9-0. Now, realize God's providence in this. If Ruth Bader Ginsburg had still been on the court, the decision would have been 5-4 in the other direction. That gives us a sense of the disregard there is in the United States for the worship of God and convictions that are grounded in the worship of God.

Corresponding to the proliferation of a secular worldview, the rise of LGBTQ and BLM activism, and the affirmation of Critical Race Theory in this nation, we are witnessing an increasing hostility to biblically-faithful Christianity. It is seen as hateful and bigoted and oppressive and racist and intolerant. The history of the church of Jesus has seen a lot of martyrdom, but Christians were not martyred for their sincere faith in Jesus Christ. As Paul Washer has said, "That was the real reason, but no one heard that publicly. They were martyred and they were persecuted as enemies of the state, as bigots, as narrow-minded stupid people who had fallen for a ruse and could contribute nothing to society." It will be no different with the persecution that is coming. As Washer says, "We will be called things we are not and persecuted not for being followers of Christ but for being radical fundamentalists who do not know the true way of Christ, which of course is love and tolerance. [We] will go down as the greatest bigots and haters of mankind in history."

In effect those who mock Christians mock the God we worship. It is with this matter of mockery in mind that I direct our attention this morning to Psalm 115. In this psalm the people of God were under attack, and the God of heaven, their God, was being mocked. The writer of the psalm stands before the people to encourage them and to exhort them. And how does he design to do it? He points them to the glory of their great God.

I am going to read the psalm in its entirety, but we are only going to be able to cover the first 3 verses this morning.

[Read Text and Pray]

Psalm 115 is the message of a worship leader. He calls the congregation to worship and to praise the Lord. It is apparent that God's people are experiencing a time of persecution. The nations are saying to them, "Where is your God?" They are questioning the power, the presence, the very being of the God of Israel. Undoubtedly, circumstances for God's people were unenviable at the time. Perhaps they were overrun by the Assyrians. Perhaps they were in exile. The watching nations in

some sense were gathered against God's people. And yet the message of the worship leader is for the people of God to look beyond their circumstances and beyond the mockery to look to God himself. The central point, the big idea is the glory of God. And the psalmist calls God's people to make much of his glory. I call us to the same thing. It is what we need when times are distressing, when the enemy encroaches, and when troubles abound. So I want you to behold in this wonderful psalm the compelling glory of God.

As we commence, we behold . . .

I. The Glory of God as the Consuming Passion.

The glory of God consumes the heart of the worship leader. Before addressing the people of the Lord, he cries out to God himself. "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory."

A. A couple aspects of this cry stand out. First of all, the worship leader recognizes that he and his people do not deserve God's action on their behalf. "Not to us, O Lord, not to us!" It is not for us and it is not because of us. He is coming to God and saying that the people are unworthy of God's attention and love. They need it, to be sure, but they are not worthy of it. He is not coming to God in order to demand anything from God. The congregation has no right in themselves to his mercy. It is not as if the people are good people who deserve that the Lord should help them. But rather what they need is God's mercy. They need his grace. And he is just that kind of God. He possesses steadfast love and faithfulness.

The second aspect of this cry is that the worship leader longs for God to get glory, for God to get credit, for God to be recognized, for his praise to be increased and intensified. The Lord is the one who is worthy. The poet says, "to your name give glory." Isn't this striking that the psalmist is asking God to give glory to himself, to magnify his own greatness? In essence he is saying, "I may be asking you to act, but ultimately I am not doing it for me or for us; I am doing it for you. I want the nations to know how great you are. I want more voices to join in the chorus of praise sung by those who stand in awe and amazement at your magnificence."

So, he is not driven primarily by the desire to get relief from the unfortunate and difficult circumstances in which the people find themselves. He is driven by a concern for the reputation of God. This call to worship God is driven by a passion to worship God. It is God-centered from first to last. Much so-called worship of God in our day is actually the exaltation of man. It is more about me and my feelings than it is about God. It is more concerned with what I can get from God for myself than what I can give to him. This psalm stands in stark contrast. It is consumed with what God is going to get out of my situation more than what I might get. Whatever the psalmist might get, his preeminent and passionate pursuit is that the Lord receive glory.

B. Every Christian should make it our aim to have a heart like the heart of this psalmist. We should cry out to God in prayer, in life, in every circumstance, in every breath, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory."

We should not hesitate to draw near to God and to do so with confidence. It is right that we call to mind the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness. And upon this basis let us draw near to God that we might receive grace and mercy to help in time of need. But we should draw near humbly. Gone should be every ounce of a sense that God "ought" when we appear before God's throne for help. We need to bear in mind that once we were dead in the trespasses and sins in which we walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. We were by nature children of wrath like the rest. We deserve

nothing but eternal punishment. For us to even be able to cry out to God is a praise to his mercy and majesty. That sense of humility should permeate our souls as we approach the Lord.

But not only should we approach the living God with humility. We should also be driven with a passion for the glory of God as we approach him. The desire for God's glory to be magnified should propel and shape our prayers and our living and our priorities. "Not what lifts me, exalts me, satisfies my desires for comfort and ease, not what makes me feel good, but whatever magnifies your name is what I cry out for with every breath, O Lord." That should be our plea and our way of life. Jesus taught us to pray this way: "Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be YOUR name, YOUR kingdom come, YOUR will be done on earth as it is in heaven." These are to be first and foremost in what we are seek as Jesus told us to "seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness."

And so even when we are in a spot of trouble, even in the midst of uncomfortable circumstances, even when the world turns against God's people and begins to say, "Where is your God?" the cry of our hearts needs to be for God to give glory to his name."

So from the outset we see that the psalmist's consuming passion was the glory of God. He moves forward in calling God's people to worship by directing them to consider . . .

II. The Glory of God Displayed.

It begins with the question, "Why?" "Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" Put another way, the mockery of the nations directed at God is ridiculous. There is no basis whatsoever for the nations to scorn our Lord! Just look at the gods they worship! There isn't even a comparison between them and our God. At this point the psalmist puts "Our God" on display in contrast to the gods of the nations.

A. In verse 3, the psalmist states, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." This statement says a lot.

1. First, our God is in the heavens. Think about it. The nations are earthly-minded. They build earthly temples and shrines in which they place their gods. But, says the psalmist, our God is in the heavens. It draws our attention to the prayer of Solomon when he had completed the temple. He prayed, "But will God indeed dwell with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built!" To say, "Our God is in the heavens," does not mean he is far off from helping us but is to say that he is not contained on the earth or by the earth. He made the heavens and the earth after all, and he is greater far than a god who can be held within the bounds of an earthly temple or even the earth itself. To say Our God is in the heavens is to say he transcends earth. And in that sense he is incapable of being manipulated or controlled by what happens on the earth. He is beyond any assault of the nations. He is beyond any aggression that could be launched by his enemies. It is laughable that people think they can escape God by closing their eyes to his existence.

Psalm 2 depicts it this way. "Why do the nations rage and the peoples of the earth plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.' He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision."

Our God is in the heavens. He is where their gods are not nor shall they ever be! To him be glory!

2. Not only is our God in the heavens, he also exercises sovereign dominion from there. The psalmist declares, "our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." What he PLEASES he DOES. ALL that he PLEASES he DOES. No one has power over our God. He has power over all things. This statement can only be applied to the one true God. Neither you nor I do all that we please. There are plenty of things everyday we would like to do that we do not because we cannot. But there is nothing that God cannot do if it pleases him to do it. Moreover, there is nothing that God will not do if it pleases him. In Isaiah 45, he declares:

I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness;
I make well-being and create calamity; I am the Lord, who does all these things.

He does according to his will. None can stay his hand. This was the confession of Nebuchadnezzar after God humbled him and then his reason returned to him. He lifted his eyes to heaven and blessed the Most High and praised him saying, "all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, "What have you done?"

Paul, writing to the Ephesians, states simply that "we have been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will." That is, God plans and purposes what he pleases, and he acts in keeping with that plan. What his will counsels is what he pleases, and what he pleases is what he does. It is another way of saying what the psalmist says here: "Our God does all that he pleases." Nothing can constrain him or restrain him. Nothing can sidetrack him or surprise him. False gods, calamities, the devil, demons, fraud, even persons making unconstrained choices with total disregard for God can only accomplish his purpose. Even disobedient Christians cannot thwart God's purpose and plan and determination. Everything fits in the overall scheme designed by what pleases God. Our God is unassailable, unthwarted, and undaunted. He cannot be overcome!

And that means even when the nations appear to be against us, even when the nations are mockingly asking "where is your God?" even then everything remains under our Lord's command and control. Even then he is acting according to what he pleases. The taunts of the nations, the ridicule of the world must not cause the people of God to be shaken. No, even then he is working to accomplish his good purpose. Even then God is at work weaving together all things for good for his glory and his people.

The greatest work our Lord was pleased to do took place in the midst of mockery and hostility. The scribes, chief priests, and elders scorned Jesus while suspended on the cross. "He saved others; he cannot save himself," they sneered. "He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, 'I am the Son of God.'" The mockery of God's enemies did not thwart God's work or God's plan; it fulfilled it. Jesus at that moment was bearing the sin debt we owed to God for our sins. He was absorbing the wrath that was due our iniquity. He was experiencing the mockery we deserve for the foolishness of our turning away from the one true and glorious God. The cross itself occurred according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23). It was the will of the Lord to crush him; he has put him to grief; the will of the Lord is in fact prospered by this act.

Only through the work of Christ on the cross could it be said to God's great glory that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. Our God is in the heavens, and even when the sinful, hostile world is gathered together against his very own Son, he is doing what pleases him. It

is not pleasure in crushing the Son in and of itself, but pleasure in crushing the Son for the purpose of revealing God's steadfast love and faithfulness in redeeming sinners. Upon the basis of the Father's putting the Son to grief and Christ's sacrifice of himself for this purpose, sinners who will turn from disobedience and trust in Christ Jesus are reconciled, redeemed, forgiven. What must you do to be saved from God's wrath due your sins? You must turn from sin and trust in God's son Jesus. If you have yet to do that, I hope you will today.

Sin does not thwart God's plan. False gods do not thwart God's will. Mockers do not stand in God's way. They can only unwittingly find themselves to be dreadfully defeated as God magnifies his glory while doing good to his people.

B. The godless nations rage in blindness. They lift their voices against the Lord. They connive to throw off the restraint and constraint of God. They ask, "where is your God?" as though he does not exist or is powerless or is a figment of the imagination. But followers of Christ, you who reverence the one true almighty and eternal God who made the heavens and the earth, take heart. Your God is the only God there is. He is in the heavens and he does all that pleases him. The animosity and resistance of the godless merely display the blindness that has engulfed their thinking. Thinking themselves wise, they have become fools and suppress the truth. They have exchanged glory for shame and darkness and degradation. We must not allow ourselves to be influenced by them to fear, anxiety, worry, or despair. And we must not allow ourselves to be like them.

The sovereignty of our glorious God assures us and enables us to hold on with hope no matter what is going on around us. If we seek his glory, then we can rest assured.

Conclusion

David in Psalm 11 paints an alarming picture. He writes, "The wicked bend the bow; they have fitted their arrow to the string to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart; if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?"

Here was his answer: "The Lord is in his holy temple; the Lord's throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man. He tests the righteous." When all around our souls gives way, it is a test. Is he then our hope and stay? When the nations say, "Where is your God?," we have a reply from the Lord himself. "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases." The Lord is in his holy temple. We will trust him. We will hope in him. We will worship him. We will seek his glory.