

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

God Alone is To Be Feared

(Psalm 76)

-Martin Rizley-

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One of the great teachings of Scripture concerning the true and living God is that, while His character invites our complete and unqualified trust, at the same time, His character should also inspire in us a sense of reverent fear. If, on the one hand, we are encouraged to confide in God because of His integrity of character, and the greatness of His mercy and compassion toward sinners, yet on the other hand, we are exhorted to fear Him, out of a due appreciation of His power and holiness, knowing His the power of wrath and the severity of His judgment on the unrepentant and the unbelieving. The God in whom we are to put our trust is, at the same time, a God before whom we are to tremble in awe.

That is the message of the psalm before us this morning. In this psalm, we are assured in this psalm of God's goodness, for we are told that He is "the deliverer of the oppressed of the earth." But we are also told, in no uncertain terms, that He is a God to be feared, for He is both a warrior and a judge, and His strength is irresistible. He is not a God who is not be trifled with, any more than you would trifle with a lion.

James Montgomery Boice gives a very helpful outline to this psalm: 1) Verse 1-3 answer the question "Where is God known?" 2) Verses 4-10 answers the question "What has God done?" and 3) Verses 11-12 answer the question, "What Should I Do?" Since that is such a helpful outline, I will use it this morning as we look at this psalm.

I. Where is God known? (vs. 1-3)-- The first question this psalm answers is extremely important for the times in which we are living-- where is God known? We are told the answer to this question in verses 1 and 2: "In Judah God is known; His name is great in Israel; in Salem also is His tabernacle, and His dwelling place in Zion." Judah was the name of the southern kingdom during the period of the divided kingdom in the history of the Jewish nation. It was in Judah where the city of Jerusalem was located, and the Jewish temple, which was the only place on earth where God had authorized the offering of sacrifices. The name is another name for Jerusalem, and Mt. Zion was the hill that was chosen as the location for the temple. So what God is saying in this verse is that His name is revealed in specific place, a place associated with the true worship of God -- in Judah, in the city of Jerusalem, and on Mt. Zion, where the temple was built. It was there that God's chosen people worshipped Him in accordance with revealed truth,

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truth communicated to them by God's holy prophets. If people want to know who God is, the psalmist is saying, that is where they need to look.

Why is this truth so very important for the times in which we are living? Because it highlights a truth that many people in our day do want to hear, and that is, that all religions are not alike. Truth is not relative, so true religion is not whatever we want it to be. Acceptable worship does not consist in looking into ourselves and our own hearts and worshipping God any way we please. Many people in our culture think that way. They think, the only thing that matters for worship to be acceptable is that it be sincere. No one has a right to tell you what you should believe, for one person's ideas about God are as just good as another, one religion is just as good as another. For all religions are essentially one in their essence, and they only differ in non-essentials. They may seem to be pointing in different directions like the spoke of wheel, but they meet at the hub, at the center, which is God.

Do you see how this opening statement contradicts that way of thinking? Because by saying, "In Judah God is known," the psalmist is telling us that we must worship in truth-- not according to our own ideas, but according to His self-revelation, wherever He has made Himself known. And in Old Testament times, God's divine revelation was associated with Judah, Jerusalem, and the temple; that is why the psalmist says "In Judah God is known."

Jesus affirmed this truth, you will remember, when he spoke with the Samaritan woman by the well in Sychar. The Samaritans were descendants of those Jews who returned to the Promised Land after the Babylonian exile and intermarried with the pagan peoples of Canaan. They had developed a syncretistic form of religion based on certain teachings found in the Bible mixed with teachings of pagan origin. They thought their worship of God was acceptable, but Jesus Himself told the Samaritan in his conversation with her, "You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22).

What very, very strong words from the mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ! He is basically telling this woman, you are worshipping God in ignorance, and such worship cannot be acceptable, because He is a God of truth. To draw near to Him, you must acknowledge that fact that He is known in Judah-- you must seek the knowledge of the true God where He has made Himself known. True religion is from the Jews-- and that truth is as valid today as ever before. To throw out the revelation that God has given of Himself and His divine will in the Hebrew Scripture is to throw away true religion. That is exactly what we see happening in our own day in denominations that are throwing out biblical authority. They are embracing a mentality which says, "God is however you

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conceive Him to be. Truth is determined by each individual by looking into himself and basing his theology on his own subjective experiences, rather than an objective revelation. Therefore, and what is true for one may be different than what is true for another."

What a far different concept of truth that is than the concept Jesus upholds when He says to the Samaritan woman "salvation is from the Jews." or when He rebuked the religious leaders of His day by saying to them, "Is this not why you err, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God." Jesus never drove a wedge between his own teaching and that of the Old Testament; although His coming rendered the Old Covenant per se obsolete, so that we no longer have to keep the ceremonies and rituals that pointed to His coming-- He did not do away with all divine commandments, so that we may now live lawlessly. Neither did He abolish those great moral duties revealed in the Law, which are founded on the order of creation and which are written on the hearts of believers by the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

So what does it mean now, in the aftermath of Christ's coming, to say "God is known in Judah." It really means now that "God is known in Jesus Christ," since Jesus comes in fulfillment of Old Testament revelation, descended from the tribe of Judah. By His coming He confirms the truth of the Law and the prophets. Moreover, He amplifies Old Testament revelation by His own teaching.

What I want us to realize when we read the opening words of this psalm, however, is that they are not only referring to the fact that God made Himself known in Judah through the ministry of the prophets and of Jesus. That is true, but there is more that God is saying here, because looking at the next verse-- verse 3: "There He broke the arrows of the bow, the shield and sword of battle" The broken arrows, the broken shield and the broken sword speak to us of victory in battle. Do you see what the psalmist is saying? He is saying that in Judah, God has made Himself known by His divine acts of judgment as a mighty warrior, by defending His people from their attackers. It was at Mt. Zion that God responded to the cry of His people by delivering them from their enemies and thwarting the wicked plans they had to plunder His covenant people. By stretching out His mighty arm to crush the enemies of His people, He has made known His power as God, and His character as a righteous Judge who will execute judgment on those who war against Him.

Many commentators think this psalm was occasioned by a specific historical event, reflected in the imagery of verses 4-10. That leads to point 2 in my outline, "What has God done?"

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II. What Has God Done? (vs. 4-10) The first thing to point out about these verses is the eerie picture in verses 5 and 6 of armies lying in what seems like a state of suspended animation. The psalmist speaks of stouthearted men, valiant warriors, who have been "plundered," stripped of all their weapons and armor; and if we glance back at verse 3, we see who has done the plundering-- the Lord Himself. He has broken their flashing arrows, shields, swords, and weapons of war.

It is a striking image the psalmist paints here; in our mind's eye, we can see row after row of brave warriors, spread out over a battlefield, silent and motionless and completely still, like stone statues. They have been slain by the Lord Himself, who has put a stop to their activities by the breath of his mouth. At His rebuke, they have been rendered motionless. The sleep into which they have sunk is the sleep of death.

This scene calls to mind a remarkable event that took place in the history of Israel, an event that many commentators believe provided the historical context for the writing of this psalm. That event was the invasion of Judah by Sennacherib, the king of Assyria, in the year 701 B. C. At the time of that invasion, the king of Judah was the godly king Hezekiah. After entering Judah, Sennacherib's troops came against the city of Jerusalem and surrounded it. The arrogant king of Assyria then sent a threatening message to Hezekiah to demoralize him and mock him for putting his faith in the God of Israel. He reminds Hezekiah that nations which had already been plundered by the Assyrians all had their own gods, and they had trusted their gods to deliver them, but in vain. In response to Sennacherib's threats, Hezekiah lifted his voice in prayer to the Lord. He beseeched God to intervene a powerful, even miraculous way-- to lay bare His mighty hand and outstretched arm to deliver His people.

In response to that prayer of faith, God sent Hezekiah a message by the prophet Isaiah assuring him that He would intervene to save His covenant people. Assyria's army would soon be defeated, and the Assyrian king would return to his own land by the way he had come. It seemed like impossibility that such a thing could take place, given the fact that Israel was ridiculously outnumbered by the Assyrian army, which had 185,000 soldiers. But Hezekiah knew, and the Lord soon demonstrated, that with God, one is a majority. God's power is infinite, His wisdom is unsearchable, and He has ways and means of accomplishing the humanly impossible. It came pass, that on a certain night after Hezekiah received Isaiah's message, "The angel of the Lord went out, and killed in the camp of the Assyrians one hundred and eighty-five thousand; and when people arose early in the morning, there were corpses-- all dead. So Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and went away, returned home, and remained at Nineveh."

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We don't know for sure that this was the historical setting in which Psalm 76 was written, but it seems likely; and in any event, the picture of dead armies scattered over a battlefield, perfectly accords with what took place in the days of King Hezekiah.

Having painted for us this incredibly eerie picture of devastation, a multitude of defeated, disarmed soldiers sunk into the sleep of death, along with their horses and chariots, the psalmist then goes on to draw out several wondrous truths about God from this picture.

1. God alone is to be feared (read v. 7) -- This is the very first truth that every human beings needs to learn to have a proper knowledge of himself, of the world in which he lives, and of God. He must learn that the true and living God, the Almighty Creator, is not a God to be taken lightly. He is not a God whose authority can be dismissed or whose word can be ignored with impunity. Neither is he a God whose goodness can be taken for granted, for He is not obliged to show us his favor. It is only when we understand the sovereign freedom of God in bestowing grace, and the fact that we cannot oblige God to save us from our sins by religious or moral deeds done that we have done to earn His favor-- it is only then that will learn the fear of God and take refuge in His sovereign mercy as our only hope. That is why A. W. Tozer said, "No one can know the true grace of God who has not first know the fear of God."

2. God alone has the final word (v. 8) -- The second lesson the psalmist draws out concerns the God's judgments; and that is that the judgments of God are final. He alone has the final word, and when He pronounces judgment on an unrepentant, unbelieving soul, there is no appealing that judgment to a higher court of law. "You caused judgment to be heard from heaven; the earth feared and was still."

Thank God there is day coming when every unbelieving mouth will be shut once and for all. When every baseless objection that men bring against the precious gospel of Christ will be silent, and those who have fought relentless against God's truth will hang their heads in shame and have nothing to say. God will render them speechless with His judgment; he will silence them, so that their lies and their slanders and their ungrateful blasphemies and curses will cease forevermore.

3. God's judgments go hand in hand with His mercy (v. 9) -- The third lesson the psalmist draws out is that God's judgments go hand in hand with his mercy. Verse 9 says, "When God arose to judgment, to deliver all the oppressed of the earth. . ." Notice how the word judgment is joined to the word deliver. This reminds of the fact that God doesn't execute His wrath without at the same time showing mercy. Why? Because

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throughout the whole of human history, ever since man fell into sin, God has reserved a people to Himself who are the objects of His sovereign mercy.

Even at moments in moments of history when it appears that all is black and there is nothing but judgment-- as at the time of the flood, for example, when God destroyed all mankind on account of sin-- yet even then, in the midst of that terrible judgment we see the evidence of God's goodness and mercy-- for there, riding high on the waves of the flood is an ark in which is eight souls were preserved to be the nucleus of a new start for mankind. God showed mercy to Noah and his family in the midst of judgment. We see the same thing happen in the city of Sodom, as God in His wrath remembered mercy and delivered the family of Lot from the fires of judgment that fell on that wicked city. And at the time of the Exodus, we see once again how God used the plagues of Egypt, not only to bring judgment on the Egyptians and to expose the falsehood of the idols they worship, but as the occasion of Israel's deliverance from bondage. In our own day, it is distressing to see God's hand of judgment on our land at the present time, but we need to remember that if God is now arising to judgment, it is to deliver at the same time, the oppressed of all the earth. He will surely purify His church, and strengthen, and deliver us from evil, as we go on trusting in Him and looking to Him for deliverance.

4. God is glory is manifested by His acts of judgment (v. 10)-- The fourth lesson the psalmist draws out is that God's glory is manifested by His acts of judgment. That is the truth that seems to be in view when the psalmist says, in verse 10, "Surely the wrath of man shall praise You, with the remainder of wrath You shall gird yourself."

When the psalmist speaks of the wrath of man being to the praise of God, he seems to be pointing to the fact that God overrules man's unrighteous wrath as an occasion for bringing glory to Himself. We think of how He dealt with Pharaoh, for example, a man who was filled with unrighteous bitterness and wrath against the Lord, who grew harder and harder in his stubborn rebellion against the more longsuffering and patience God showed him. The more he raged against God, by refusing to submit to His authority, the more God was glorified as His acts of judgment on Egypt displayed His mighty power, His hatred of sin, and His superiority to idols.

III. What Should We Do? (vs. 11-12)-- Well, in light of these sobering truths, what should we do? What does God want our response to be?

A. We need to commit ourselves to the Lord fully, and fulfill our commitments faithfully--

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The psalmist communicates this idea of commitment in verse 11 by speaking of vow making. The person who truly trusts God is not afraid of making firm commitments to Him and expressing those commitments publicly. That's what we do in our baptism, isn't it. Not only do we express trust publicly our trust in the Lord's promises to us, we make vows to Him that we will hold fast to Him and love Him and walk with Him in humble submission to His will to the end of our days, by the grace of God.

B. Those who are far off from God also need to own Him by bringing Him gifts-- The reference in verse 11 to "those who are around Him" seems to be a reference to people who lived around Judah, that is, people from neighboring lands who heard of the Lord, and His mighty power and holiness and justice. They needed to be willing to leave their idols and to come in gratitude to the true and living God, bearing gifts of thanksgiving as an offering of worship to God. These words seem to anticipate a day when multitudes of pagans who do not in Old Testament times worship the true God will finally be brought to Him, and will approach joyfully and gladly with appreciate hearts. We ourselves are a fulfillment of this prophecy.

The psalmist foresees how proud kings will lay aside their arrogance and tremble in awe before the King of kings and Lord of lords. They will bow to Him and recognize Him as their supreme sovereign; and those who refuse to do so will be "cut off." The breath of life in them will be taken away, and they will be shown to be mere men, not the demigods they imagine themselves to be. .

CONCLUSION-- So the calling of God is to fear God and Him alone. If God alone is to be feared, then we have no reason to be afraid of what man can do to us. We have no reason to fear the wicked plots that ungodly men may devise to harm us. God is overruling all things, and will cause all things to turn out for His glory.

This is a word of comfort in these times in which we are living, in which Christians seems to push more to the margins of our society and culture. When we consider the things taking place in our government to promote wickedness, to erode Christian values in the culture, to rescind religious freedom to live in accordance with the dictates of conscience, it can be quite distressing. Nevertheless, we ought not to fear, or doubt the power of God to overturn the schemes of the wicked. We need to recall ever to mind that God is on His throne, He really is ruling from His place on high in order to make all things turn out for the good of His people. Christ's glory continues to shine just as brightly today as ever before in the lives of countless believers all over the world, some of them living in very difficult circumstances and under very oppressive regimes. The fact that Satan and all his hosts can never put out that light,

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should fill with great joy and remind us that we have nothing to fear, and no one to fear, but God alone. Amen.