

Summer Psalms

*Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
² but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2 ESV)*

But you, you are to be feared!

Aug. 7th, 2022

Psalm 76

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Introduction:

Good morning! I want to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 76. A few weeks ago, I referenced a famous quote by A.W. Tozer, and I want to direct your attention back to it as we prepare to worship our way through Psalm 76. He wrote:

What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.¹

Perhaps you're tempted to dismiss that quote as an exaggeration, but don't be so hasty.

Think about it: The way that you respond to hardship, spend your money, treat your neighbour – the way you conduct yourself when no one is watching – EVERYTHING about you is shaped and dictated by your view of God.

Who is He? What does He require of you? What will it be like when you stand before Him?

When you think about God, what do you see?

Is He just a mythological fairy tale that weak people lean on to get them through their miserable lives? Is He the friendly genie who exists to make your life easy? Is he the personal therapist who

¹ A.W. Tozer as quoted by R. Albert Mohler Jr. *The Apostle's Creed - Discovering Authentic Christianity in an Age of Counterfeits* (Nashville, TN: Nelson Books, 2019), 3.

consoles and cuddles you when things don't go your way? Is He the self-righteous god of the pharisees? Is He the ever-conforming-to-the-culture god of the people pleasers? Or is He – and this is the most common of them all – the god who looks and thinks and behaves exactly like you?

Who is He? What you believe about God truly is the most important thing about you. And that's why we must be a people who are shaped by the Word. This is the place where God has revealed Himself. "But," you might object, "but JESUS is the WORD MADE FLESH! So THAT is where we see the clearest revelation of God!" Of course, that's true. But where do we learn about Jesus? In the word. This is the place where we learn who God is.

Therefore, we need to read broadly and deeply in His Word. We need to fight the urge to skip the bits that challenge our preconceived ideas. We need to see Him as He truly is – not as we want Him to be.

Having said all of that, I want to warn before we go any further that there are almost certainly some people in this room who are worshipping a god who is not the God of the Bible. And, as we turn our attention to this passage, it is quite possible that the God who the Psalmist worships here is going to feel like a foreign entity to you. The God of Psalm 76 is fierce. The God of Psalm 76 executes judgement. The God of Psalm 76 is a frightening God!

I want to tell you from the outset that, if you struggle to worship along with the Psalmist in today's text, the problem is not with the text. The problem is with you.

If we want to live rightly, then we need to know Him rightly. And if we would know Him rightly, then we need to invite Him to reveal Himself to us through His word. To that end, look with me to Psalm 76. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

In Judah God is known;

his name is great in Israel.

² His abode has been established in Salem,

his dwelling place in Zion.

³ There he broke the flashing arrows,

the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war. *Selah*

⁴ Glorious are you, more majestic

than the mountains full of prey.

⁵ The stouthearted were stripped of their spoil;
they sank into sleep;
all the men of war
were unable to use their hands.
⁶ At your rebuke, O God of Jacob,
both rider and horse lay stunned.
⁷ But you, you are to be feared!
Who can stand before you
when once your anger is roused?
⁸ From the heavens you uttered judgment;
the earth feared and was still,
⁹ when God arose to establish judgment,
to save all the humble of the earth. *Selah*
¹⁰ Surely the wrath of man shall praise you;
the remnant of wrath you will put on like a belt.
¹¹ Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them;
let all around him bring gifts
to him who is to be feared,
¹² who cuts off the spirit of princes,
who is to be feared by the kings of the earth. (Psalm 76:1-12 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In his commentary, Alec Motyer titled this Psalm:

To Know is to Fear²

I think that's a helpful summary of what we find here. In Psalm 76, we are confronted with a warrior God! He is a God who strikes down armies – a God who makes the kings of the earth tremble! FEAR is the predominant theme in this Psalm. And yet, I want you to notice that the Psalmist is not bemoaning God's ferocious, terrifying power. No, on the contrary, he's DELIGHTING in it!

Think about that for a moment. I don't pretend to be an authoritative voice for my generation, but in my estimation, we have all but lost the fear of the Lord. I suspect that some of you even now are bristling at the idea that God should be feared. In our hearts, we celebrate His love, but we diminish His holiness. We turn up the dial on His grace, but we attempt to mute His justice. If you don't believe me, then do a quick survey of the top 100 worship songs in North America today.

² Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2016), 211.

We have neglected the holiness of God. And in doing so, we have forgotten how to tremble. That is terribly dangerous, because:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,
and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (Proverbs 9:10 ESV)

In Psalm 76, the Psalmist is delighting in a frightening God! He's reminding us that our God is a consuming fire! He is the God who slaughters the armies of the wicked! He is a God to be feared! And that is good news because **THAT IS THE GOD WE NEED!**

So with the time that we have this morning, we're going to survey the Psalm, and then we are going to make a resolution for ourselves moving forward. First, let's survey the Psalm.

Surveying the Psalm

We are going to divide this Psalm into two halves. In the first half, we find:

1. A victory in the past

In the opening 6 verses, the Psalmist describes a scene in which God miraculously defeated those who stood in prideful opposition to His people. The verbs are all past tense. "*He broke* their flashing arrows, the stout-hearted *were stripped* of their spoil, horse and rider *lay stunned*." He's remembering back to a victory in the past. The reference is vague – and that was likely intentional so that the song could be used as a celebration for any and every victory – yet almost every commentator agrees that this Psalm is pointing back to God's victory over Assyria.

The Assyrians were – at the time of their attack upon Jerusalem – the most formidable army on the planet. Under the reign of King Sennacherib, they were overwhelming any who stood in their path. The Assyrians were terrorists. They impaled their captives on poles. They cut open pregnant women. They were like a living, breathing nightmare!

And this living, breathing nightmare had surrounded Jerusalem's walls. They mocked the Israelites for trusting in God. They shouted out for all the inhabitants to hear:

Behold, you have heard what the kings of Assyria have done to all lands, devoting them to destruction. And shall you be delivered? ¹² Have the gods of the nations delivered them, the nations that my fathers destroyed, Gozan, Haran, Rezeph, and the people of Eden who were in Telassar? (2 Kings 19:11-12 ESV)

The Assyrians were shamelessly arrogant. They declared, "The gods of the surrounding nations couldn't deliver them from our hands. Do you think yours will fair any better?"

But it is not wise to mock God. As the author to the Hebrews warns:

For we know him who said, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay." And again, "The Lord will judge his people." ³¹ **It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.** (Hebrews 10:30-31 ESV)

The Assyrians had no fear of the Lord, and in their arrogance, they put God to the test – a test that they would pay for with their lives.

Surrounded and terrified, the inhabitants of Jerusalem repented of their sin and cried out to God for deliverance. The taunts of the Assyrians and the desperate cries of His people prompted God to action. In 2 Kings 19:35, we read:

And that night the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. (2 Kings 19:35 ESV)

I want to make sure that you don't miss what we just read. God struck down 185,000 soldiers! Is the God of your imagination a God who would kill an entire army for their sin and arrogance? Because the God of the Bible is.

The author of Psalm 76 does not blush at this detail – nor does he explain it away. Rather, he DELIGHTS in His powerful, terrifying God! Listen again to his delight:

In Judah God is known;
his name is great in Israel.
² His abode has been established in Salem,
his dwelling place in Zion.
³ There he broke the flashing arrows,
the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war. *Selah*
⁴ Glorious are you, more majestic
than the mountains full of prey.
⁵ The stouthearted were stripped of their spoil;
they sank into sleep;
all the men of war
were unable to use their hands.
⁶ At your rebuke, O God of Jacob,
both rider and horse lay stunned. (Psalm 76:1-6 ESV)

GLORIOUS ARE YOU!! It is GOOD NEWS that You are frighteningly powerful! It is GOOD NEWS that You are with us! It is GOOD NEWS that the enemy has been struck down! Our God is a terrifying God and that is VERY GOOD NEWS!!

There's an amazing line in the Chronicles of Narnia that I've quoted more than once, and I'm going to do it again. Susan had questions about Aslan – Aslan was a lion that C.S. Lewis used to represent Christ – so she asked Mr. Beaver to tell her more about him. He responded:

“Aslan is a lion- the Lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he- quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"... "Safe?" said Mr Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you.”³

Far too many of us have traded out the God of the Bible for a “safe” god. The Assyrians made the mistake of assuming that He was a “safe” god. The Psalmist here DELIGHTS in the reality that our God IS NOT A SAFE GOD!

But He's good.

³ As quoted in: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/344456-aslan-is-a-lion--the-lion-the-great-lion-ooh>. Accessed August 4, 2022.

Our enemies surrounded us. They mocked us. They roared over the walls at us. But, in their careless arrogance they awoke the Lion of Judah! And they did not live to make that mistake again.

Having drawn confidence from that victory in the past, the Psalmist looks forward. And that brings us to the second half of the Psalm where we find:

2. A confidence for the future

Look with me again at verses 7-12:

⁷ But you, you are to be feared!
Who can stand before you
when once your anger is roused?
⁸ From the heavens you uttered judgment;
the earth feared and was still,
⁹ when God arose to establish judgment,
to save all the humble of the earth. *Selah*
¹⁰ Surely the wrath of man shall praise you;
the remnant of wrath you will put on like a belt.
¹¹ Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them;
let all around him bring gifts
to him who is to be feared,
¹² who cuts off the spirit of princes,
who is to be feared by the kings of the earth. (Psalm 76:7-12 ESV)

As the Psalmist considered 185,000 slain soldiers – as he reflected on how the most powerful king on the planet was silenced overnight – he was filled with confidence for the future!

God doesn't change! Who will stand before Him when He rises up against His foe? Justice will rain down! The humble will be lifted up! God has done it! God will do it! You can count on it! That's what the Psalmist is declaring here.

And I want to draw your attention to verse 10. The psalmist declares with confidence that “the wrath of men shall praise you”! Do you understand what he's saying? He's declaring in confidence that even the vile, wicked, malicious acts of men cannot thwart the will of God! They

will, in fact, be used to demonstrate His glory! Rebellion will be transformed to praise! We see this time and time again in Scripture.

Joseph's brothers, for example, acted out of petty wickedness when they threw their brother into a pit and then sold him into slavery. However, their sin was merely an instrument that God used to further his redemptive purposes in the world, such that Joseph could declare:

As for you, you meant evil against me, **but God meant it for good**, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. (Genesis 50:20 ESV)

We find this same juxtaposition in Peter's sermon at Pentecost. He looked out over the Israelites and declared:

this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. (Acts 2:23 ESV)

It was God's definite plan that Jesus was to be crucified for the sins of the world. God was ultimately the chief cause behind the crucifixion. Nevertheless, Peter says to the Israelites, *you crucified him!* You did it! You sinned in a grievous way, but even in your sin God's glory was on display.

It was this same confidence in the sovereignty of God that enabled the Apostle Paul to declare:

And we know that for those who love God **all things work together for good**, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28 ESV)

Joseph and Peter and Paul are all saying the same thing that the psalmist is declaring in this passage: Even the wrath of man will be the praise of God! We know how this story ends!! God's fiercest foes lash out against him, but their rebellion only serves to further His glory! His purposes cannot be thwarted! His reign and rule is never threatened! Every blow that the enemy delivers is a nail in his own coffin. When he crucified the Son, he sealed his own demise. The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Our God is sovereign over it all and HE CAN'T LOSE!

I can understand why unbelievers hate this doctrine. They hate the idea that God is in control because they reject Him altogether. However, the sovereignty of God is a doctrine that is also

rejected by many Christians, and I don't have the faintest idea why that is. It is everywhere in Scripture and, whenever it appears, it is given as a reason for our comfort and confidence. As William Plumer notes:

What an unspeakable consolation to know that the permitted opposition of the church's bitterest enemies shall contribute to her good, and that there is a voice which says to every invading foe, 'thus far shalt thou come and no farther.'⁴

Praise God for that! God is completely and entirely in control of every single detail for all time.

Therefore, when the King of Assyria thought that he could mock God's authority, his army disappeared in a night. Before that, Korah and his sons thought that they could usurp the leadership that God had entrusted to Moses, but they were swallowed up into the earth. Before that, Pharaoh thought that he could enslave the people of God, but his entire army was swallowed up in the sea. And before that, in the opening pages of the Bible, the devil thought that he could stand in opposition to God. But he was promised that the day would come when his head would be crushed by the Son of God himself. And now death is swallowed up in victory!

The Psalmist sees victory in the past and confidence for the future, and he concludes:

¹¹ Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them;
let all around him bring gifts
to him who is to be feared,
¹² who cuts off the spirit of princes,
who is to be feared by the kings of the earth. (Psalm 76:11-12 ESV)

This leads me to propose a resolution for today.

A Resolution for Today

Resolved: Fear God and NOTHING else!

Listen: This world is a scary place! I get it. The Israelites were living in a nightmare! Perhaps some of you feel as if you're living in a nightmare right now! There are MONSTERS out there!

⁴ W.S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016), 737.

But the King is in here.

And He is the only One who is worthy of your fear. That's why Jesus taught us:

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. (Matthew 10:28 ESV)

Who or what are you afraid of? Take a moment to really think about it. What is the fear that drives you?

Is it a fear of abandonment? Embarrassment? The inability to provide for your family? Public disgrace? Sickness? The loss of a loved one? Discomfort? Death?

The thing that you fear most dictates your life far more than you realize. And that's why it is such a dangerous thing that we've lost the fear of the Lord.

If we truly feared the Lord, we wouldn't do things in the dark that we do. We wouldn't speak to each other or about each other the way that we do. We wouldn't give all of our time and attention to selfish, trivial things the way that we do. We wouldn't indulge sin in our lives the way that we do. It's as if we've forgotten how this story ends! Consider Revelation 19 for a moment:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! The one sitting on it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. ¹² His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems, and he has a name written that no one knows but himself. ¹³ He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God. ¹⁴ And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. ¹⁵ From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron. He will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. ¹⁶ On his robe and on his thigh he has a name written, King of kings and Lord of lords. (Revelation 19:11-16 ESV)

He is the King! He is the Lord! He is the One who sees all and who knows all! And when he returns at the trumpet sound, and we see his terrifying glory, we will wonder why we ever feared anything or anyone else!

The Psalmist looked back on the Lord's victory over Assyria, and he trembled. How much more then ought we to tremble?! The victory that transformed the Psalmist PALES in comparison to the victory that we have witnessed!

Jesus has triumphed over our greatest enemy – death itself – and has risen victoriously from the grave! How can we fear anyone or anything when God has proven that not even the grave can overcome those who are in Christ?! Thus, the Apostle Paul transposes this confidence into a New Testament key when he declares:

For **I am sure** that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39 ESV)

I AM SURE! Why is Paul sure? Is it because of Paul's own strength? His own ability to hold on? His own ability to persevere? No!

Paul is SURE because Paul knows who his God is! And what he believes about God is the most important thing about him. Paul is sure because he knows that he belongs to a BIG, POWERFUL, GLORIOUS, GRACIOUS, FRIGHTENING God! He belongs to a God who has CONQUERED DEATH ITSELF!

So, even if the most terrifying nation on the planet is shouting at us through the walls – even if Goliath is standing across from me with a spear in hand – even if the devil himself threatens to kick in my door – LET HIM COME!

Because the KING is in here. And he is more frightening than anything that can come through those doors.

Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. (1 John 4:4 ESV)

Fear God, and NOTHING else. To that end, let's pray together.