

# OpenTheo

## November 29th: Psalms 75 & 76 & Acts 23:12-35

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The God who executes judgment. A plot against Paul.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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## Transcript

Psalm 75 All the horns of the wicked I will cut off, but the horns of the righteous shall be lifted up. The U section in the middle of Psalm 74 is also answered in the I section of Psalm 75, where God himself speaks to the concern of his people and promises to act in judgement. Schaeffer argues that the shift in address and number likely indicates that the psalm belonged in the context of a liturgical celebration where different people or groups would be voicing different parts.

It begins with the voice of the gathered congregation in verse 1. It moves to an oracle from God himself in verses 2-5, which is followed by the psalmist's declaration about God and his determination to continue to sing his praises. Beth Tanner maintains that the divine oracle ends in verse 3, at which point the voice of the psalmist resumes. The psalm concludes with a final statement from God himself.

It begins like a typical hymn of communal thanksgiving and celebration. God is praised

for his goodness and his wondrous deeds. In verses 2 and 3, and possibly even into verses 4 and 5, the voice of God enters.

At the set time, God's judgement will come. God is the creator who first set the earth upon its pillars. He is the one who will steady it when it totters, something that he will do as he judges with equity.

The God of creation is the God of justice. The God who establishes the physical foundations is the God who establishes the moral foundations. Whether it continues to be the voice of God, or whether it is the voice of the psalmist, verses 4 and 5 warn those who boast and are haughty.

Tanner argues from the presence of a *seelah* at the end of verse 3 and the introductory *I* said of verse 4 that there is likely a change of speaker in verse 4, suggesting that it is most likely a priest or official. The horn that is spoken of in verses 4 and 5 is a symbol of might, strength and honour. While we read of God lifting up people's horns on several occasions in the Psalms, the warning here is against lifting up one's own horn in a proud manner.

The danger of lifting up one's own horn is laid out in the verses that immediately follow. Lifting up of the horn doesn't come from an earthly or human source. God is the one who judges, and he is the one who will lift up the horn of the righteous.

It is his judgement that divides between the righteous and the wicked, lifting the one up and bringing the other low. The imagery of the cup is one that we encounter on several occasions in the Psalms and in the prophetic material of scripture. A person's cup is related to their portion and heritage.

The cup can be a positive image, for instance when the psalmist speaks of the Lord himself as his portion and his cup in Psalm 16 verse 5, of his cup overflowing in Psalm 23 verse 5 or of the cup of salvation in Psalm 116 verse 13. However, cup imagery can also be employed in a negative way. The psalmist speaks of fire and sulphur and a scorching wind being the portion of the wicked's cup in Psalm 11 verse 6. The imagery of the cup is also found in the prophets.

Isaiah chapter 51 verse 17, Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the Lord the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering. Jeremiah chapter 25 verse 15 to 16, Thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me, Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword that I am sending among them.

The same sort of imagery can also be found in the book of Revelation as the hollet drinks the cup of God's wrath. In contrast to the way of the wicked is the psalmist's

commitment to singing the praises of the God of Jacob described in verse 9. There are two contrasting ways of life and the psalmist has devoted himself to the way of trust and praise in the Lord. The final words of the psalm seem to be from God himself.

Once again they concern the lifting up of the righteous and the cutting off of the wicked, returning to the imagery of the horn. Horns will be lifted up, but they will be lifted up by God himself, not by the proud. Psalm 76 To the choir master with stringed instruments, a psalm of Asaph, a song.

In Judah God is known, His name is great in Israel. His abode has been established in Salem, His dwelling place in Zion. There He broke the flashing arrows, the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war.

Glorious are you, more majestic than the mountains full of prey. The stout-hearted were stripped of their spoil. They sank into sleep.

All the men of war were unable to use their hands. At your rebuke, O God of Jacob, both rider and horse lay stunned. But you, you are to be feared.

Who can stand before you when once your anger is roused? From the heavens you uttered judgment. The earth feared and was still, when God arose to establish judgment, to save all the humble of the earth. Surely the wrath of man shall praise you.

The remnant of wrath you will put on like a belt. Make your vows to the Lord your God and perform them. Let all around him bring gifts to him who is to be feared, who cuts off the spirit of princes, who is to be feared by the kings of the earth.

Psalm 76 is a song of triumph and victory. The date of its composition is unclear, although a connection between it and the deliverance of Hezekiah from the Assyrian army was made from very early on. Its content is fairly straightforward.

Derek Kidner writes, There is a strong simplicity in the pattern of this psalm, which first looks back to a great deliverance, verses 1-6, and then on to a greater judgment, verses 7-12. The former is local and defensive, with Zion, God's earthly base and residence, under concerted attack. The latter half is cosmic, with heaven as God's seat, the world his kingdom, and all who suffer injustice his concern.

So it is to some extent a miniature of the biblical story itself, from the circumscribed and fiercely fought beginnings to the end time when, through all man's opposition, God's salvation and judgment will have reached their climax and full spread. Alan Ross suggests that it might be better to be subdivided into the first three verses as a hymn of praise to the Lord, followed by the next six verses, which give the reasons for the praise in two parts, concluding with a response to the Lord in the final three verses. The psalm begins with the fact that God is known in Judah and great in Israel.

Israel and Judah have a uniquely intimate relationship with the Lord, which is cause for praise. He dwells in the midst of his people, placing his name in Zion. Verse 2 describes God's dwelling place and abode using language redolent of a den or a lair.

The Lord is like the lion who dwells on the mount, establishing peace as he destroys the weapons of war. Verses 4-6 describe a dramatic and great victory, mighty warriors and their horses brought low at the rebuke of God. Perhaps developing the imagery of verse 2, verse 4 describes God's majesty from the mountains of prey, or of his majesty being greater than the mountains of prey.

The Lord is like a mighty lion who would guard his territory against any incursion. God stripped the enemies of their strength. Perhaps this is a description of the victory over the Assyrians in the days of Hezekiah.

The preceding verses seemingly spoke about a specific deliverance at Jerusalem in the presumably recent past. Verses 7-9 expand the frame. God is the fearsome God, the warrior who puts to flight the wicked.

His judgement came from the heavens and silenced the earth. He judges on behalf of the humble of the earth. The final verses of this psalm are more challenging to translate or to understand.

Some have argued for references to specific places, to Edom and Hamath. Others suppose that we have metaphors that cannot easily be understood. What might putting on the remnant of wrath like a belt mean? The general point it seems to me is most likely that God uses the very anger and violence of his enemies to demonstrate his own power and judgement in a manner that redounds to his glory.

God is sovereign over all things and even the fury of his enemies can be, as it were, rendered God's own battle garments. He can entirely subordinate their rebellion and wickedness to his own good ends. The psalm concludes by summoning people to make and to perform their vows to the Lord, to bring tribute to him as the God who is the master over all of the rulers of the earth, cutting off the spirits of princes and being feared by kings.

A question to consider, what are some examples of the Lord using the wrath of man for his glory? Acts chapter 23 verses 12-35 Now the son of Paul's sister heard of their ambush, so he went and entered the barracks and told Paul. Paul called one of the centurions and said, Take this young man to the tribune, for he has something to tell him. So he took him and brought him to the tribune and said, Paul the prisoner called me and asked me to bring this young man to you, as he has something to say to you.

The tribune took him by the hand and going aside asked him privately, What is it that you have to tell me? And he said, The Jews have agreed to ask you to bring Paul down to

the council tomorrow, as though they were going to inquire somewhat more closely about him. But do not be persuaded by them, for more than forty of their men are lying in ambush for him, who have bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they have killed him. And now they are ready, waiting for your consent.

So the tribune dismissed the young man, charging him, Tell no one that you have informed me of these things. Then he called two of the centurions and said, Get ready two hundred soldiers, with seventy horsemen and two hundred spearmen, to go as far as Caesarea at the third hour of the night. Also provide mounts for Paul to ride, and bring him safely to Felix the governor.

And he wrote a letter to this effect, Claudius Lysias, to his excellency the governor Felix. Greetings. This man was seized by the Jews, and was about to be killed by them, when I came upon them with the soldiers and rescued him, having learned that he was a Roman citizen.

And desiring to know the charge for which they were accusing him, I brought him down to their council. I found that he was being accused about questions of their law, but charged with nothing deserving death or imprisonment. And when it was disclosed to me that there would be a plot against the man, I sent him to you at once, ordering his accusers also to state before you what they have against him.

So the soldiers, according to their instructions, took Paul and brought him by night to Antipatrus, and on the next day they returned to the barracks, letting the horsemen go on with him. When they had come to Caesarea, and delivered the letter to the governor, they presented Paul also before him. On reading the letter, he asked what province he was from, and when he learned that he was from Cilicia, he said, I will give you a hearing when your accusers arrive, and he commanded him to be guarded in Herod's praetorium.

Paul was taken in the temple by the Romans, delivering him from the mob who were about to kill him. The tribune, Claudius Lysias, was trying to get to the bottom of things, to discover why the Jews so hated him, and in chapter 23 he is just testified before the Sanhedrin, but his mention of the resurrection had produced such dissension in the council that he once again had to be rescued by the Romans. That night the Lord appeared to him, and told him that he would have to testify concerning him in Rome.

Paul has faced a number of plots to this point in the book of Acts, and has been delivered from each one of them. There were plots against him in Damascus and Jerusalem in chapter 9, and in Greece in chapter 20. Now he faces a seemingly more serious plot, about which he is alerted by his nephew.

Jesus of course had plots against him during the period of his ministry also. Once again this plot is instigated by the Jews. Their oath not to eat or drink until they kill Paul might

recall the rash vow of King Saul back in 1st Samuel chapter 14.

There are 40 of them involved, which is a very large number, and they go to the chief priests and the elders telling them about their conspiracy and getting them involved. The chief priests and elders would have to ask the tribune to bring Paul down to them, and then while they were on the way they would strike Paul when he was exposed. The involvement of the chief priests and elders is important here.

The Jewish authorities and aristocracy, for all of their supposed lawfulness and their cooperation with the Romans, are only too happy to employ assassins and to align themselves with bandits. Going against the law of Rome. Paul has been accused of subversion, but here the very authorities are corruptly acting against the law, and quite purposefully seeking to circumvent the justice of Rome.

The sort of corruption and violence from the authorities that we see here is also testified to by the writings of Josephus, who describes the sort of intrigue that was found among the Jewish authorities of the period, and the collusion of the aristocracy and chief priests with robbers and brigands. Earlier in this chapter Ananias the high priest clearly acted contrary to the law in his handling of Paul's case. Now we are beginning to see how deep the lawlessness of the rulers and the aristocracy goes.

This sort of corruption would ultimately contribute to the downfall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Here it also serves an apologetic purpose for Luke. Paul and the Christian movement, while they are accused of breaking the law and being seditious, are law abiding and not seditious, whereas the accusers from the Jews are profoundly compromised and complicit with brigands and robbers.

News of the plot gets to Paul's nephew. Considering the number of people involved, 40 people, presumably younger men, and the chief priests and the elders, it might not be entirely surprising that word leaked out. Paul had spent most of his earlier life in Jerusalem.

His sister presumably moved to Jerusalem at the same time as he did, and likely married there. We know that Paul was a very well connected person prior to his conversion. He studied under Gamaliel, he had access to the high priest, he advanced in his studies more than others, and he was a Roman citizen.

It's likely that his sister, his brother-in-law and his nephew moved in the higher parts of Jerusalem society, where his nephew might have gotten wind of the plot. As a relative of Paul, Paul's nephew would also have had access to him to provide needed support when he was in the barracks. Paul was in the barracks, not a prison, and various allowances would have been made for him to receive visitors, particularly visitors of family that would support him.

After Paul's nephew informs him of the plot, Paul instructs the centurion to bring his nephew to the tribune. The tribune listens carefully to the testimony of the nephew. He presumably knows enough about the Jerusalem authorities not to trust them.

The report of this plot presumably had the ring of truth to it. Knowing that 40 men lie in ambush, presumably well armed, in a place where they would be unseen and where terrain would be to their advantage, he determines to send a large contingent of soldiers with Paul. Paul was also given a mount to ride, presumably to allow him free movement if they were attacked.

The size of the force sent with him is surprising. It is very large, about 470 men, 200 soldiers, 70 horsemen and 200 spearmen. It might be the case that hearing these rumblings and plots, the tribune is concerned to give a show of strength.

Whatever is the case, we should see God's providence in this situation. The Lord has delivered Paul out of plots before, and now he does so again. The tribune, Claudius Lysias, sends a message with the contingent to the governor Felix.

It is possible that Luke had access to the original letter. The letter briefly describes the tribune's part in Paul's case and the plot against him. The tribune clearly skirts over certain details that might be inconvenient to him, for instance the fact that he only found out that he was a Roman citizen as he was about to whip him.

Along with sending Paul to Felix, he has also instructed the accusers of Paul to bring their case before Felix. The group escorting Paul splits up at Antipatrus. The most dangerous leg of the journey having been completed, the soldiers can return to Jerusalem while the horsemen go on with Paul.

Antipatrus was about 37 miles northwest of Jerusalem, about half way to Caesarea. Upon his arrival, Paul was presented before the governor Felix along with the letter that Lysias sent. Felix promises a hearing when Paul's accusers arrive.

A question to consider. What can we say about the relative presentation of the Jewish and Roman authorities within the Book of Acts?