

Psalm 76 explores the historical precedent for eschatological hope. It links God's renown in Judah with the universal judgment of God at the end of time. God's ability to defend Jerusalem against vicious and valiant warriors by means of a mere rebuke is a precursor to the finality of his wrath against mankind. Such power inspires God's people to praise and motivates the kings of neighboring lands to submit reverently and to humbly "bring gifts to the One to be feared" (Ps 76:11).

The Asaph tradition keeps the big picture of God's story before us. The total destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army (Psalm 74) is a marked exception to God's protection of Israel made necessary by her flagrant apostasy (Psalm 73). The psalmist sees the just judgment of Israel as a precedent for God's universal judgment and calls on God to remember his people and vindicate his name (Psalm 75). Psalm 76 celebrates the victory of that historical judgment as proof of God's ultimate power and justice and looks forward to the time when God will break "the spirit of rulers" and the kings of the earth will submit (Ps 76:12).

When Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) he signaled a new dimension to salvation history that exchanged ethnicity and local geography for the global church. The great commission and Pentecost ushered in the Gentile mission and a new perspective on the universal impact of the gospel. "What neither the Old Testament nor Jesus revealed [explicitly] was the radical nature of God's plan, which was that the theocracy (the Jewish nation under God's rule) would be terminated, and replaced by a new international community, the church."¹ This is why Paul said, "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body. . ." (Eph 1:22). The scope of salvation is well beyond the personal salvation of the individual, as important as that is. The church encompasses "the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (1:23). God's plan is "to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (1:10).

The true Jew was no longer a matter of race and ritual. As the apostle Paul explained, "No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code" (Rom 2:9). The true children of Abraham received Christ, who was not only the Messiah to the Jews, but the Savior of the world. They proclaimed the gospel to Jew and Gentile inclusively. "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal 3:26-29). Jesus prayed Psalm 76 in a radically new way and Christians today follow his lead. The Lion of Judah has become the Savior of the world.²

¹ Stott, *God's New Society*, 118.

² Augustine, *Psalms*, 356. Commenting on the true Jew, Augustine writes: "They then are more truly Jews, who have been made Christians out of Jews: the rest of the Jews, who in Christ have not believed, have deserved to lose even the very name. The true Judea, then, is the Church of Christ, believing in that King, who hath come out of the tribe of Judah through the Virgin Mary; believing in Him of whom the Apostle [spoke], 'Be thou mindful that Jesus Christ hath risen from the dead, of the seed of David, after my Gospel' (2 Tim 2:8). For of Judah is David, and out of David is the Lord Jesus Christ."

God's Rebuke

God is renowned in Judah;
in Israel his name is great.
His tent is in Salem,
his dwelling place in Zion.
There he broke the flashing arrows,
the shields and the swords, the weapons of war.
You are radiant with light,
more majestic than mountains rich with game.
The valiant lie plundered,
they sleep their last sleep;
not one of the warriors
can lift his hands.
At your rebuke, God of Jacob,
both horse and chariot lie still.

Psalm 76:1-6

For the psalmist to say that God is renowned in Judah is likely to solicit a “no big deal” from the late modern skeptic. Secular history examines “the great civilizations of Assyria and Egypt, of Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome, but Israel (if it figures at all) will hardly be more than a blip on the mental horizon.” Bray continues, “To write the history of antiquity putting Israel at the center is rather like writing the history of Europe from the standpoint of Luxembourg, a country that is geographically central but otherwise insignificant.”³ Salvation history departs from the world’s criteria of greatness and focuses on God’s strategy of redemption. God chose a small, insignificant people through whom to bless all people. He pitched his metaphoric tent in the arid land of Palestine, in a town named Salem, which meant “peace” (Genesis 14:18). The scandal of particularity narrows salvation’s means down to a specificity that seems incredible, yet perfectly consistent with everything else about creation and redemption.

“Out of enormous space a very small portion is occupied by matter at all. Of all the stars, perhaps very few, perhaps only one, have planets. Of the planets in our own system probably only one supports organic life. In the transmission of organic life, countless seeds and spermatozoa are emitted: some few are selected for the distinction of fertility. Among species only one is rational. Within that species only a few attain excellence of beauty, strength, or intelligence.”⁴

Divine selection is based on mercy, not merit. Covenant love is extended to the smallest and the weakest, not the best and brightest (Deuteronomy 7:7-9). “The ‘chosen’ people are chosen not for their own sake (certainly not for their own honor or pleasure) but for the sake of the unchosen. Abraham is told that ‘in his seed’ (the chosen nation) ‘all nations will be blest.’ That nation has been chosen to bear a heavy burden. Their sufferings are great: but, as Isaiah recognized, their

³ Gerald Bray, *God is Love*, 38.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, 121.

sufferings heal others.”⁵

The descent of God into human history reaches its climax in the incarnation. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). We can hardly imagine the the shocking truth of the incarnation – the “vastness of God confined in the womb of a maid” (Clarkson). In God’s redemptive strategy, Jesus was “born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law” (Galatians 4:4-5). His lowly birth in Bethlehem symbolizes the scandal of God’s descent into human history. The humility of God “dwelling in the land of Zion” is transcended by an even greater humility. The Incarnate One, Jesus Christ, “Who, being in very nature God. . . made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Phil 2:6-7).

The word the psalmist used to describe God’s “abode” or “dwelling-place” in Zion may refer to a dense thicket or lion’s lair (Amos 3:4; Jeremiah 25:38), implying that Zion is home to the Lion of the tribe of Judah.⁶ The connotation introduces the power of God to protect and guard his people against the state-of-art weapons of war. The Israelite foot soldier feared a squadron of horse driven chariots. Today we fear a suitcase size nuclear smart bomb. But no matter how ingenious the weapons of war may be they are no match for God’s thunderbolts and pathogens. The God of Jacob is able to stop an army in its tracks and render the powerful powerless with a simple rebuke (Isaiah 37:36; 2 Kings 19:35). The image of God fighting for his people finds its ultimate redemptive trajectory in God’s defeat of sin and death. “In this world you will have trouble,” Jesus said, “But take heart! I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). And in the face of danger the apostle Paul said, “But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere” (2 Cor 2:14).

God’s Wrath

It is you alone who are to be feared.
Who can stand before you when you are angry?
From heaven you pronounced judgment,
and the land feared and was quiet –
when you, God, rose up to judge,
to save all the afflicted of the land.
Surely your wrath against mankind brings you praise,
and the survivors of your wrath are restrained.
Make vows to the Lord your God and fulfill them;
let all the neighboring lands bring gifts to the One to be feared.
He breaks the spirit of rulers;
he is feared by the kings of the earth.

Psalm 76:7-12

⁵ Lewis, Miracles, 122.

⁶ Ross, Psalms, 615; Delitzsch, Psalms, vol.2, 344.

The psalmist moves from God's historic protection of Israel to God's ultimate eschatological fulfillment. "The action is no longer localized, or past, or defensive. God is foreseen striking the final blow against evil everywhere, as Judge."⁷ Far from being an embarrassment, the wrath of God is cause for praise. God's wrath does not mean "the intemperate outburst of an uncontrolled character. It is rather the temperature of God's love, the manifestation of his will and power to resist, to overcome, to burn away all that contradicts his counsels of love."⁸ The wicked are condemned; the righteous vindicated. The psalmist's rhetorical question to God, "Who can stand before you when you are angry?" is echoed by the prophet Malachi in his prophecy of the Lord's second coming (Malachi 3:2). It is also vividly described in the opening of the sixth seal in the apostle John's apocalypse (Revelation 6:12-17). John elaborates on the meaning of Psalm 76 as he captures the finality of the end. The sixth seal moves from the chaos of evil to the coming cataclysmic undoing of everything that opposes God. The reality of judgment reassures believers that justice will prevail. Evil will only come to an end in God's final judgment.

The purpose of God's wrath is salvation, "to save all the afflicted ["meek," "humble"] of the land" (Ps 76:9). The scope of God's justice is not limited to the land of Israel, but extends to the whole world. Kidner writes, "His little kingdom of verses 1-3 was His bridgehead, never His boundary. This was as wide as the earth, and His objective the salvation of 'all poor men and humble'" (Ps 76:9b).⁹ Human anger and wrath is like fuel for the fire of God's purifying wrath. God uses and consumes everything that is used against him. The psalmist pictures God taking the wrath of mankind and belting it around his waist, arming himself for battle with the evil of man. The image implies that man brings down upon himself the judgment of his own evil ways. Spurgeon captures the truth of the psalm: "Let men and devils rage as they may, they cannot do otherwise than subserve the divine purposes. The remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain. Malice is tethered and cannot break its bounds. The fire which cannot be utilised shall be damped. Some read it "thou shalt gird, "as if the Lord girded on the wrath of man as a sword to be used for his own designs, and certainly men of the world are often a sword in the hand of God, to scourge others. The verse clearly teaches that even the most rampant evil is under the control of the Lord, and will in the end be overruled for his praise."¹⁰

In the meantime, while we wait for God's final judgment and the end of evil, the psalmist counsels obedience – deep obedience and sacrificial gifts to "the One to be feared" (Ps 76:11). We are encouraged to submit to the One who has the power to break "the spirit of rulers." The psalmist's universal warning to "the neighboring lands" and "the kings of the earth" corresponds to the warning given in Psalm 2: "Therefore, you kings, be wise; be warned, you rulers of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear and celebrate his rule with trembling" (Ps 2:10-11; see Rev 19:11-16).

⁷ Kidner, Psalms, vol.2, 275.

⁸ M. Barth, Ephesians, 231-232.

⁹ Kidner, Psalms, vol 2, 275.

¹⁰ Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Psalm 76