

Psalm 76
Run to your Judge
Christ Church Liverpool
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My mum comes from a family with a history of several generations of Christian belief. But she would describe herself as agnostic. I'd say she's pretty militantly and dogmatically agnostic. But then she's probably say I'm pretty militantly and dogmatically Christian.

For my mum, and for millions of other people in our country, the killer argument against belief in the Christian God, the one thing that best expresses why Christianity cannot be true, is the things Christians say about God's judgment.

How can we believe in a God who is angry all the time? How can we stomach a God who pours out judgment on those who don't massage his ego by believing in him?

And doesn't believing in God's judgment on the "unfaithful" inevitably take Christians in the direction of superiority, smugness and hatred? Surely it fuels a "them and us" attitude and ends up with the despicable prejudices the church has shown throughout its history to black people, gay people, Jews and all other groups assigned to the category of "spiritual reject" by bigoted Christians?

I have a lot of sympathy with that argument. Because it's true that Christians can be desperately smug and complacent in the face of the Bible's teaching about God's judgment on those who do not follow Jesus Christ.

And it's true that the prospect of people we know and like, people who seem kind and thoughtful who share our social interests and whom we enjoy spending time with is a terrible one. The prospect that they should be judged seems awful to us if we have an ounce of sensitivity in us.

The trouble is that it seems to me the teaching of the Bible about the need for our world to be judged, about the need for God to pronounce his verdict, publicly and openly on all that goes on on this planet is one of the most obviously true things in the world.

Who can seriously look around the earth and say that it is not a world in need of judgment?

We live in a country which is, for the most part, orderly. This is a place where most people keep most laws most of the time. A place where, if you commit a serious crime the chances you will be

caught and punished are pretty high. Yet even here there is so much obvious and blatant wickedness that goes unpunished by human means.

Across the world and down through history the unpunished murders, rapes, child abuses, thefts and robberies run into tens of millions. And that's just the crimes. To say nothing of the billions of wickednesses that are not criminal but which surely need redressing – the adulteries, the lies and the broken promises.

Looking at our world it seems to me astonishingly obvious that it is a world that deserves to be judged. And if, as I imagine, the tendencies to selfishness and wickedness that I see in my own heart are typical of other people then it is clear that, every individual, along with me, deserves judgment.

People profess to find it incomprehensible that God should be angry.

I have to say that the more I sit and think about it I find it unbelievable that the good God who made this world would not be angry and enraged and desperately sad at what we have done with his astonishing and beautiful creation.

Well according to Psalm 76 it's not just ethics or philosophy that portray to us the necessity of God's judgment. Because this Psalm makes clear that history also testifies to God's awesome wrath.

And it tells us how we ought to respond to the truth about God's wrath so that we are neither people who reject the truth about God and pretend that there is judgment **or** smug, self-satisfied Pharisees who believe in God's judgment, but only for people we don't like.

I History testifies to God's awesome judgment (v1-6)

The book of Psalms as we now have it was probably put together as a single book during or shortly after the period when the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon, about 600BC.

Many of those who read this Psalm, 76, in the newly compiled "Psalms, complete edition" would recall the beauty of the hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the wonders of the ancient world. They would have marvelled at the sophisticated technology and

town planning that put that great city together – probably the most advanced city in the world until the rise of Rome some 500 years later.

And they would be familiar with a Jerusalem that looked even more like a building site than the centre of Liverpool. The temple, the royal palace, the walls and many of the houses had to be rebuilt at the return from captivity or exile by Nehemiah, Ezra and their associates after generations of neglect and destruction.

And, in truth, compared to the great cities of the ancient world Jerusalem had never, even at the height of its power, been the most impressive of places.

Which makes it all the more striking that it is there that God chose to reveal himself. It was in the nation of Israel, vI, that there was true knowledge of the living God. It was in Salem, in Zion, in Jerusalem that God established for himself a throne and manifested his presence on the earth in a particular and special way.

Why? Well not because Jerusalem was the most impressive place – any more than the people of Israel he called to be his people were an impressive people. But just because he chose that city. God elected, he sovereignly and freely chose Jerusalem for himself just because he wanted to.

His choice invited the scorn of the nations. But the Psalmist insists that the lesson of history is clear. However unimpressive God's dwelling place may seem to the arrogant and the scornful, God's judgment will fall on anyone who rejects his kingship, his right to be God.

The particular incident from history that the Psalmist has in mind in these verses seems to be the time when Sennacherib, King of Assyria, the regional superpower of the day, sent his vast army to attack Judah and Jerusalem.

You can read all about it in Isaiah 36 and 37 (and listen to a talk on that passage on the CCL web site that I gave last year!).

The commander of Sennacherib's troops came to the very gates of Jerusalem and launched a blistering verbal attack on the city and its people. He boasted how none of the gods of the other nations he had conquered had been able to save them and said that the same fate would befall Israel and its God.

But he had forgotten that the Lord was not like the other Gods. Unlike those stone and wood idols the

Lord is a living God, and this was his message to Sennacherib through the prophet Isaiah...

"Against whom have you raised your voice and lifted your eyes to the heights? Against the Holy One of Israel! By your servants you have mocked the Lord, and you have said,

"with my many chariots I have gone up the heights of the mountains, to the far recesses of Lebanon, to cut down its tallest cedars, its choicest cypresses, to come to its remotest height, its most fruitful forest. I dug wells and drank waters, to dry up with the sole of my foot all the streams of Egypt."

"Have you not heard that I determined it long ago? I planned from days of old what now I bring to pass, that you should make fortified cities crash into heaps of ruins, while their inhabitants, shorn of strength, are dismayed and confounded, and have become like plants of the field and like tender grass, like grass on the housetops, blighted before it is grown.

"I know your sitting down and your going out and coming in, and your raging against me. Because you have raged against me and your complacency has come to my ears, I will put my hook in your nose and my bit in your mouth, and I will turn you back on the way by which you came."...

"Therefore thus says the LORD concerning the king of Assyria: He shall not come into this city or shoot an arrow there or come before it with a shield or cast up a siege mound against it. By the way that he came, by the same he shall return, and he shall not come into this city, declares the LORD. For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David."

And the angel of the LORD went out and struck down a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies. Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh. And as he was worshiping in the house of Nisroch his god, Adrammelech and Sharezer, his sons, struck him down with the sword.

The mighty army of mighty men, with all the latest war technology – horses and chariots and swords – was utterly useless against the wrath and judgment of the Lord.

The soldiers couldn't even lift a sword against the angel of judgment who came amongst them.

In real history God has poured out his judgment against real people. Not because his people, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, were all really good and had some sort of right because of their purity to call down condemnation on others.

Not at all. God judged the Assyrian army's arrogance for the sake of his own name.

History testifies to the reality of God's judgment.

Now of course there are all sorts of examples throughout history of the downfall of powerful but ultimately unjust empires the, however noble their intentions, resulted in oppression for some and slavery to power and riches for others – the Roman Empire, the Chinese dynasties, the Russian Tsars, the Soviet Union, the British Empire. And there is no doubt from the Bible that God always sets himself against empires of power and self-glorification.

But with this particular example of the judgment of Sennacherib and his army it is even more clearly visible that usual that this was a divine judgment. His army were not wiped out in a battle but by a sudden and instant plague of judgment direct from God himself.

So what should we learn from this lesson of history?

Well, very kindly, the Psalmist tells us the application of his own poem in verses 7-12...

2 So the godless must fear God (v7-9a)

TV journalist Louis Theroux recently presented a programme where he spent time with the members of Westboro Baptist Church. Which sounds innocent enough until you discover that this church's web site is the unpleasantly named "godhatesfags.com".

This church, which turns out mostly to be members of a single family, says that the number of American soldiers being killed in Iraq is a direct result of the toleration of the authorities of homosexual people serving in the armed forces.

9/11, they claim, is God's wrath being vented against the acceptance by New York and other big cities of gay lifestyles and gay people.

These people are hateful and wicked. They even picket military funerals with placards proclaiming the hell bound destination of the person being buried, gay people, government officials – almost everyone, in fact, except the members of their church.

But isn't that where believing in a divine judgment inevitably takes you?

Doesn't believing in God's wrath mean you will always end up like the members of Westboro

Baptist church? A bigoted, spiteful, unloving, religious lunatic? I think not. And the clue to why not is found in these verses.

You alone, v7, are to be feared. Who can stand before you when you are angry?

The obvious implied answer to that question is... NO ONE. Not one single person can stand before the wrath of God. Because it isn't directed at dictators or paedophiles or gay people or religious people or whoever else you want to put in your personal Room 101 of those you think deserve judgment.

God's wrath is directed against all the wicked. Against everyone. V8: "From heaven you pronounced judgment and the earth [better than land here] feared and was quiet."

In the face of God's judgment no one has anything to say. Because those who believe in the God of the Bible see that everyone stands justly condemned before him.

V7 is actually quoted in the last book of the Bible as the coming of God's final judgment on the world is described.

And the list of those who come under his wrath is comprehensive. Listen to these words from Revelation 6: "*Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty AND every slave and free man his in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?"*"

The godless should stand in fear and terror at the reality of God's judgment on wickedness.

And that means that all should fear God – because all are God's enemies by nature. If you have become a Christian without first having been profoundly and deeply convicted of your wickedness and of the desperate plight you would find yourself were you to face God's judgment... If you have become a Christian without being aware of your utter inability to stand before the heat and light of God's perfect and holy character...

Then it is likely that you will end up in a place where you are judgmental of others you consider to be more wicked than yourself.

The cure for becoming like the people of Westboro Baptist church is not, as many would have us believe, to reject the idea of a God who

judges all who will not worship him and live his way.

Rather it is to start by recognising that God is perfectly just in that judgment and that it ought to start with you.

For those here who are not Christians, I do not want to soft peddle the reality of God's anger at your sin. But I want to say very clearly that God is wrathful at everyone's sin and that Christians rejoice in God not because they are better – but because they are rescued.

3 And God's people must rejoice in God (v9b-10)

War seems to bring out the best and worst in people.

Last week I listened to an interview with Thomas Keneally, author of the book *Schindler's Ark* which Stephen Spielberg made into the film, *Schindler's list*.

Set against the backdrop of one of the most systematically wicked and calculatingly bloodthirsty events in the history of the world – the mass execution of the Jews of Europe by Hitler and his Nazi's – the book tells the story of Oscar Schindler.

A man who for most of his life, both before and after the war, did little of any great merit or service to anyone but himself, Schindler saved hundreds, even thousands of Jews from death by protecting them for work in his factories.

Working in Oscar Schindler's factories would not, in normal circumstances have been considered a great salvation.

But against the background of the wicked things that were happening all around them it was, as Keneally's title suggests, a place of salvation – an ark, like Noah's, that protected from the raging waters all about.

In stark and total contrast to Hitler's Holocaust God's judgment is totally just and righteous.

But against the background of the terrible fate of those who face his wrath the wonder and joy of God's salvation is seen all the more clearly.

In fact the very purpose of God's judgment, v9, is to save and rescue the afflicted of the earth. That's not saying that God will rescue anyone who happens to be poor, as if he has something against the very wealth he has provided.

The afflicted are often poor. But some of them are materially rich too – Old Testament heroes like Abraham, David, Daniel and others.

The afflicted are those who are grieved and saddened by their own wickedness and that of the world around them. They are those who, knowing that there is no cure for our own hearts, have turned to God in hope that he, in his mercy, will replace and change our wicked natures so that we can know him and relate to one another rightly.

The afflicted are God's people. Because it is impossible to be one of God's people and not be afflicted by the pain and sadness of living in a world that has rejected God.

And yet because judgment comes with salvation the afflicted, anybody who loves God and who longs for his coming in the person of his son the Lord Jesus Christ, should rejoice.

We should rejoice, first, because, as we have seen the coming of judgment means the coming of salvation. Nowhere is that more clearly seen, of course, than at the cross of Jesus Christ where God's judgment was revealed more fully than at any other point in history up to this day and where it was poured out on God himself so that anyone who comes to him might be saved.

We should rejoice, secondly, because, v10, God's wrath against men brings him praise. Those who recognise the perfect holiness and righteousness of God will see that God's judgment shows the wonder of his character. Of course we hate the thought of the terrible punishment that awaits those who have rejected Christ. Of course we ought to weep to see the wicked perish. God himself, the Bible tells us hates the wilful rebellion and death of the wicked. Why will you die? He asks those who will not come to him.

But he will not compromise his character, his godness, all that he is. He is holy. He is just. And the terrible crimes of humanity will not go unpunished. His judgment will reflect his perfect character and bring him glory.

And we should rejoice, thirdly, because the survivors of God's wrath are restrained. In this life we see that worked out in the way in which where there is justice dealt out by the state, under God, crime is restrained and wickedness held in check.

And we will see it at the end of time when God's final judgment will totally purify his creation and recreate the earth as a place where injustice, crime, wrongdoing, sin and rebellion are no more.

So the question for us this morning is... do we rejoice in God's coming judgment?

Do we long for the day of God's judgment because that will herald the end of living in this sin soaked and death ridden world and the coming of final and complete salvation in Christ?

Do we pray, as Jesus taught us, that his kingdom would come – with both judgment and salvation arriving on that glorious dawn?

And do we long, most of all, for God's judgment to arrive? That will be the final vindication of God. Though his judgment will be terrible and awful it will also be glorious and wonderful because the universe will finally, visibly and undeniably see that God is pure, holy, righteous and just.

4 And all must submit themselves to God (v11-12)

How should the world respond to the reality of God's judgment – in history past and his promised final judgment?

Well simply by submitting to him as a great king. By promising your life to God – and keeping your promise. By people of all nations bringing gifts to God and acknowledging him.

God is not some local deity, as the king of Assyria mistakenly supposed. No he is the truly great king. He is the Lord.

Kings, those who ought to exercise rule and authority. Those who ought to strike fear into the hearts of others. They ought to fear the Lord.

The right response to God's impending judgment? Worship in all nations.

And that means that God's people have a responsibility. Because, just like the Psalmist, we need to declare the judgment of God so that people will know that he needs to be feared and honoured.

The doctrine of God's judgment is a profoundly evangelistic thing. It is essential that we describe to people the very real and terrible danger in which they find themselves if they do not stop running from God and turn towards him by trusting Jesus.

The gospel of Jesus is the good news that we can be saved from the coming judgment of God by putting our hope in his Son.

The good news that is for all nations needs to be taken to all nations, starting with the places where we are.

If the neighbouring lands – or the person at the next desk, in the next classroom or your next door neighbour – are to bring gifts of honour to the living God they need to know who he is.

They need to know that he has passed judgment in history and that he is coming again in final judgment.

My mum, despite her scepticism, needs to be reminded again and again that, despite her reluctance to believe it, the judgment of God is philosophically justified, morally right, historically real and coming soon to every human being on the face of planet earth.

And you and I need to be bold in telling people about that judgment so that we may offer to them the glorious, gracious, undeserved good news that, because of Jesus, we can be saved from that wrath.