

Psalm 92: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 December 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] Psalm 92, a psalm, a song for the Sabbath. The stupid man cannot know, the fool cannot understand this, that though the wicked sprout like grass, and all evildoers flourish, they are doomed to destruction forever.

But you, O Lord, are on high forever. For behold your enemies, O Lord, for behold your enemies shall perish, all evildoers shall be scattered. But you have exalted my horn like that of the wild ox, you have poured over me fresh oil, my eyes have seen the downfall of my enemies, my ears have heard the doom of my evil assailants.

The righteous flourish like the palm tree, and grow like a cedar in Lebanon, they are planted in the house of the Lord, they flourish in the courts of our God. They still bear fruit in old age, they are ever full of sap and green, to declare that the Lord is upright. He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Psalm 92 is unique in the Masoretic text of the Psalter, in being dedicated to the Sabbath, presumably for use in its worship. Indeed, it is the only reference to the Sabbath within the Psalter. Marvin Tate, however, notes that seven psalms are associated with the Sabbath in the Greek texts. John Goldingay suggests that part of the reason for this might be the shifting context of worship from the temple, where worship is less focused on the weekly Sabbath, to the synagogue.

[1 : 55] It is mostly composed like a song of thanksgiving, with instruction concerning the wicked and the righteous internal to it, in verses 6-7 and 12-15, instruction that has the character of wisdom literature.

Various proposals for the division of the psalm have been advanced. Beth Tanner divides it into three stanzas, verses 1-5, verses 6-11 and verses 12-15, a similar order to that adopted by Conrad Schaefer.

Alan Ross divides it into two parts, verses 1-7 and 8-15. Tate, following R.M. Davidson, argues for the importance of a sevenfold chiasmic or concentric structure for the ordering of the psalm, centring it on verse 8.

According to this ordering, the first section in verses 1-3 is paralleled with verses 12-15, verses 4-6 with verses 10-11, verse 7 with verse 9, and then at the centre is verse 8.

Schaefer is another one who observes the central elements of this chiasmic structure. The psalmist begins by expressing that it is fitting and also attractive to give thanks to the Lord. This is something that is expressed through singing and making music.

[3 : 05] These things elevate words in beauty. Musical instruments glorify song, as we see in the lute and the harp and the lyre here. Although we are not given the music that accompanied the psalms, the music is not incidental.

The music, both of the song and the instruments that accompanied it, express the joy of the heart and the glory and the beauty of the words and the one about whom they are expressed.

Music has the power to unite the body in the playing of instruments, in dancing, in exciting the emotions, in bringing the heart to the surface. It also has the capacity to unite a congregation. People sing together. Music can coordinate people in their labours. In scripture we see examples of musical instruments being played to assist a prophet in prophesying, or in order to remove the influence of a troubling spirit.

Music moves people, and it is important to have appropriate music as part of our worship. The psalmist says that he will declare God's steadfast love in the morning and his faithfulness by night.

[4 : 06] Worship is about proclaiming God's attributes, recounting his marvellous deeds. Doing so in the morning and the night expresses this as a continuous action. This is not something that just happens at one point.

It's something that pervades the whole of his days. Verse 5 is a declaration of how great God's works were, and the great wisdom that is manifestly behind them. We don't know what these works were, but within them, the psalmist sees something of the glory of the mind of the Lord.

The Christian hearing this might think of Paul's expression of such praise in Romans chapter 11, verses 33 to 36. In contrast to the depths of the Lord's knowledge is the folly and futility of man and his thoughts.

Man cannot understand the truth, which is the fleeting nature of the wicked's prosperity. The fool thinks that the flourishing of evildoers is something that will endure. We might be reminded here of Psalm 93, where the wicked mock God, questioning whether he has knowledge, dismaying the psalmist until he recognises the truth about the fact that the wicked will quickly perish.

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places.

[5 : 44] You make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors. Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord. When you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

The evildoers flourish like grass, but they are frail like grass and will soon pass away. The Lord, by contrast, is on high eternally. All of the Lord's enemies will be scattered and perish, but he raises up his faithful servants, whose ascending power is compared to the untamed strength of the wild ox raising its horn.

The righteous man is anointed with fresh oil, or perhaps covered in oil in celebration. In verse 12, perhaps in reference to the great works he praises in verse 5, the psalmist speaks of seeing the doom and the downfall of his enemies.

He might once have wondered, like the psalmist in Psalm 73, whether their flourishing would endure, but they are soon brought down, and the Lord's power and his providence and his wisdom is seen in the process.

The righteous, by contrast, are compared not to grass, but to a palm tree or a cedar. The palm tree presumably for its fruitfulness, and the cedar for its mighty height and strength.

[6 : 54] We see similar comparisons in Psalm 1 verse 3. The temple was a place of cedars, with representations of palms as well, symbolising, among other things, the righteous who will be planted and flourish there, never withering, but retaining a youthful vigour to their later years.

The final verse returns us to the beginning, which spoke about declaring the Lord's steadfast love and faithfulness. Now we hear the psalmist say, He will declare that the Lord is upright.

He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him. Seeing the Lord bring the downfall of the wicked, and establishing the righteous, he sees the wisdom of God's providence, and the justice and the certainty of his judgment.

