

Psalm 75

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: 13 October 2013

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] There's a very suggestive, intriguing phrase in Psalm 75 that will serve as our starting point in listening to what God has to say to us in and through this psalm. In verse 3 we read, when the earth and all its people quake. When the earth and all its people quake.

As I just gave some thought to this very descriptive language that the psalmist uses, it struck me that it was a very good description of planet earth today into the second decade of the 21st century. The earth and all its people quaking. We've been conscious of how people quake in the face of disasters of one kind or another. Even in these last days we've been able to follow the path of the cyclone as it made its way across the Bay of Bengal and hit the northeast of India.

And in this world that is a global village, it all becomes a lot more vivid as we even know of people who might be affected. Some of you will know of Doug Longmuir who works on a rig in the Bay of Bengal, and he's there right now. And even today asking, well, what was the news? I'm glad to hear that the course of the cyclone didn't go by where his rig is. But the earth and its people quaking.

And then we hear even in these past few days and weeks there's been much that has been made of what are deemed to be, what are presented to be, new insights, new evidence of global warming and the potential for what may come of that as our planet heaves under the weight of a growing and insatiable population. At the political and the religious front, North Africa and the Middle East are in turmoil. Not every single nation, but many of them. As the Arab Spring, it was thought to be such a positive development, looks increasingly more like an unforgiving winter. And even in these hours, there are many biting their fingernails as they wonder what will come of the crisis in Washington, as the politicians can't seem to get their act together. And there's the prospect of that great, powerful nation, self-declared the greatest nation on earth, on the brink of defaulting on its debt, not paying its debt, all that power. And yet, the concern, not able to pay what it owes and what the outcome of that will be, how the failure to pay its debts may bring down the whole deck of cards that is the world's financial system and the disturbingly unforeseen circumstances of such development.

Then there's also, for us as Christians, the concern, the very real concerns, as we are able to witness and observe how the moral certainties, at least what we thought were moral certainties, are being disposed of in our own nation, deemed to be past their sell-by date. Of course, we don't concur with that, but that is what we witness, the earth and all its people quaking. Well, that's maybe on the grand scale.

[4 : 1 6] But what about our own lives? What about your life? Do we know something of what it is to quake in the face of tragedy, in the face of personal failure, in the face of broken relationships, guilt, stress, trouble of one kind or another? I think we all know something of what it is to quake.

Well, in this psalm, God brings reassurance to His people in the midst of a quaking world. And the reassurance that God brings is to be experienced in the measure that we see and understand what the psalm says about God in the midst of a quaking world. And as we read the psalm, it seems to me that three big truths emerge concerning God. Three big truths that as we understand them and as we take them for ourselves, truths that grant us security and reassurance in a quaking world. And the three truths I would suggest are these, that our God is the God who is near, the God who is near, the God who is near, and the God who acts. Three truths concerning God that we find in this psalm. And we want to think of these three truths now. First of all, the God who is near.

Notice how the psalm begins. We give thanks to You, O God. We give thanks, for Your name is near. Here, men tell of Your wonderful deeds. The psalmist Asaph can declare with confidence, Your name is near. Your name, O God, is near. You are not a distant God. You are not an indifferent God.

Yes, the earth is shaking. And perhaps the psalmist is shaking with it, but he can testify that His God, our God, is a God who is near. Now, how could the psalmist know that that was so? Is this born of his own experience? Is this confidence grounded in reality? Or is it just an aspiration? Is it something that He would like to be true? And so, He declares it in some vain attempt to grant Himself reassurance?

No evidence for it, but, well, let's hope that that's the case. By no means. What does He say? We give thanks, for Your name is near. Men tell of Your wonderful deeds. What the psalmist really is doing here is recognizing that this conclusion that He has come to, this certainty that He enjoys that God. And He has come to be a God who is near. And He has come to be a God who is near, is grounded in the historical manifestation of God's works on behalf of His people. Men tell of Your wonderful deeds.

[7 : 29] And He's heard of men speak of them. And indeed, He reads in the Bible, and He hears of how God, from generation to generation, had evidenced Himself to be a God who was near to His people.

When His people cry out, He helps, He hears, He brings relief and redemption to His people. He is near.

And of course, as we turn to the pages of the Bible, we see this time and time again throughout the Old Testament, as we follow the timeline, as we follow the history of God's people, how God time and time again demonstrated Himself to be a God who is near. But of course, we live in the light of the coming of Jesus. And of course, in the coming of Jesus, in the coming of the eternal Son of God, we see God preeminently as the God who is near. Jesus is God at His nearest, God dwelling amongst us, God as one of us. In Jesus, God is near. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. Your name is near. We can declare that with even greater confidence and security than even the psalmist was able to do in the light of Jesus. But then, if we maybe think about that a little bit further and say, well, that's good.

Jesus did come. He came into this world. He dwelt amongst us, but He's not here anymore. He did the work that He had to do, and we thank God for that. But then He left. He ascended, and He's seated at the right hand of the Father. Is He still near? That was the concern of the disciples, wasn't it? They didn't want Him to go. They didn't want Him to be far away. He'd been so near. And they thought, well, if you go, then you'll be far away. We don't want you to be far away. We want you to still be near us. And what was the reassurance that Jesus gave them? It is better for me to go, because as I go, I will send another. I will send another comforter. And of course, we know that that is what happened. And God sent His Spirit that He would continue by His Spirit to be near us. Indeed, the Spirit was sent not just to dwell amongst us, but wonder of wonders to dwell in us. And so God, by His Spirit, is near. He could not be any nearer. So, as the earth quakes, the earth and all its people, and that includes us, as the earth quakes, as you have reason, perhaps, to quake, remember that God is near. So near that He hears your groans when you're not able to even verbalize the pain or the suffering that you are experiencing. So near He understands what it is that you are going through better than you do yourself. So near that He can quickly extend His hand to calm you as you quake, the God who is near. But the second truth, big truth that emerges in this psalm is that our God is also the God who is in control. As we read through from verse 2 through to verse 6, we won't do that right now, but we'll go through it just little by little as we think about this big truth, the God who is in control. Just imagine for a moment if we were persuaded and we had reason to believe that God was near, but though He was near, and that's good, that's comforting, but though He was near,

He was unable to help. Imagine if that were the case. Imagine if God was near, but that He could only look on helplessly with us as the earth quakes. By our side, near us, but equally impotent in the face of a quaking earth. Of what comfort would that be to us, that God can only express perhaps sympathy or solidarity, but no power to do anything about this quaking world. But of course, that is not the God of the Bible. Not so our God. Our God is the God who is in control. We notice in verse 2 how He is described for us as the one who is sovereign over time and history. In verse 2 we read, you say, here the psalmist is addressing God and recognizes that this is what God testifies, God says. And what does God say?

[12 : 54] I choose the appointed time. It is I who judge uprightly. I choose the appointed time or times.

This phrase translated appointed time is used on different occasions in the Old Testament. It's sometimes used to speak of the seasons, how God appoints the seasons. Notice even in the previous psalm, also a psalm of Asaph. Asaph recognizes really the same truth of God's sovereign rule over time and history. Verses 16 and 17, the day is yours, and yours also the night. You establish the sun and moon. It was you who set all the boundaries of the earth. You made both summer and winter. He is sovereign over the appointed times, over the seasons. This language or this phrase, appointed times, is also used to speak of the religious festivals and God's appointed calendar for His people.

Appointed by God. The same language is used even in the Old Testament as there is a looking forward to the end times. And there is a recognition that those times are appointed by God. All are appointed by God. Here perhaps in the light of what the verse goes on to say, there is a reference to God's appointed times of judgment, not only at the end but throughout history as God at the times He appoints, executes judgment. All of these times appointed by God, and none can frustrate His purposes. The earth and its inhabitants can quake all they wish, but this never forces God's hand. He never needs to alter His calendar or postpone His appointed times. How different for us. We feverishly plan the week ahead or the month ahead or the year ahead, and we have it all worked out. And within a day, within two days, we're having to change the dates. We're having to do things differently because it just doesn't work.

You see, we don't have control. We can't decide. But not so God. God appoints the times. He is sovereign over time and history. And you can be sure, and this is where this comfort and reassurance comes for us at a very personal level. Whatever your circumstances, you can be sure that He is sovereign over your times, even though they may seem very chaotic to you. When everything gets thrown up in the air and what you thought was going to happen doesn't happen, you can be sure that your God is sovereign over your times. As He's sovereign over the big picture, so He is sovereign over your personal times also. So, He is the God who is in control, who is sovereign over time and history.

But this verse also, or certainly as we move on to verse 3, it speaks of how He is the one who is holding all in place, even and especially when the earth quakes. When the earth and all its people quake, what does God say? It is I who hold its pillars firm. It is I who hold its pillars firm.

[16 : 27] The earth is quaking. To any outside observer, there would seem to be nobody holding anything firm. Everything seems chaotic. Everything seems to be heading to chaos and destruction. The earth is quaking. And yet God says, in the midst of that, I am the one who holds its pillars firm. Indeed, the quaking of the earth is ultimately God's doing to fulfill His purposes. It may well be that this earth quaking, maybe the psalmist has in mind different scenarios of nations rising up against God's people and oppressing God's people. And we could maybe imagine different scenarios that could be described in this way of the earth quaking. But whatever they are, ultimately, it is God who is fulfilling His purposes, even through the wicked deeds of wicked men. Listen to what the prophet Haggai has to say, using this same language of the earth shaking. In chapter 2 of the prophet, and verses 6 and 7, this is what the Lord Almighty says,

God describing Himself as the one who shakes the heavens and the earth. And notice His redemptive purpose in shaking the heavens and the earth, that the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory. That surely is also a reassurance to us. As we see the earth quake, as we see the earth shake, as we see all that seems to be lacking in direction, all that seems to be chaotic. But to understand that if even if we can't see how this is happening, this is God's doing, that He would gather His desired of all the nations. This God is the God who is in control. What are the implications of His sovereign control? Well, the psalm goes on to identify some implications of this truth that God is in control. One implication is that we can only conclude that it is altogether foolish to be arrogant, the folly of arrogance in the face of a God who is in control. Notice there in verse 4, to the arrogant I say. There's some debate here, is this the psalmist? Is this God speaking?

The truth is the truth, regardless of who it is who is voicing the truth. But what is it that is declared, boast no more? And to the wicked, do not lift up your horns. Do not lift your horns against heaven. Do not speak with outstretched neck. What has been recognized is the utter folly of arrogance in the face of a God who is in sovereign control of all. A God who is in sovereign control also implies that there is a complete absence of rivals. There may be those who purport to be rivals, but ultimately the complete absence of rivals. In verse 6, we read, no one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man, but it is God who judges. He brings one down. He exalts another. Many may imagine that they can exalt themselves and even boast that they have exalted themselves. But ultimately, it is God alone who exalts and brings low, and He remains eternally exalted over all. As the earth quakes, and as you are tempted to quake with it, remember that your God is in control. Our God reigns.

When the earth and all its people quake, we are reassured by the truth that our God is near, and that our God is in control. But thirdly and finally, our God is the God who acts. In verses 7 and 8, we read, but it is God who judges. He brings one down. He exalts another. In the hand of the Lord is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices. He pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs. In what way does God act? What does He do? Well, here we read of two connected activities in the face of man's arrogance and rebellion. He judges. We read that already in verse 2.

I choose the appointed time. It is I who judge uprightly. He judges uprightly. Of that, you can be absolutely confident. Sometimes we struggle with the very notion of judgment, and what will be the outcome of that judgment? We think of those who seem to us to be victims, and we think, well, what will be of them? Well, we don't know all the answers, but one thing we do know is that God does and ever will judge uprightly. He can do no other. And this judgment that He speaks of, it's a judgment that both exalts and a judgment that brings down. He acts. He's not silent. He's not indifferent. He doesn't look on carelessly at what is going on. He, in His time, He judges.

[22:15] And of course, connected with that, we can also say that He punishes. In verse 8, the language is very sobering. The picture painted is such a somber one. God holds a cup of judgment in His hand, and in His time, the wicked will drink their dew and drink to its very dregs. Justice will be done. None will evade the long arm of God's justice. Now, this is good news. It's good news as we examine and look and see so many who seem to get away with it, be they despotic leaders or be they people that surround us in our workplace or in our circle of acquaintances, people who act wickedly and get away with it. Well, here we are reminded in very somber language that justice will come. This is good news, isn't it? Well, yes, it is. But what about us? We're all in favor of God judging, and indeed, if we have a keen sense of justice, of God punishing those who deserve to be punished. But where does that leave us? Are we without guilt? Will we also have to drink the cup of God's judgment to its very dregs?

As God's people, we will not drink from that cup. Why not? Listen to Augustine, who puts the matter rather dramatically, very vividly, in commenting on this very psalm. What he suggests is this, the godly taste the top of the cup and feel the bitterness, but then it is suddenly snatched from them. Now, I'm not vouching for the theological accuracy of the language used. It's very vivid language, but it is, I think, helpful language. And let's just think a little bit about this idea of this cup being snatched from the lips of the righteous. Why is the cup of God's judgment snatched from the lips of God's people, if indeed it is? That's what Augustine suggests. Well, the reason that it is snatched is that the cup has already been drunk. It's already been drunk to its very dregs.

This is what Jesus has done for us at Calvary. Remember in the garden, as He anticipated all that was before Him, He cried to His Father, Let this cup pass from Me. This cup, this cup that Asaph speaks of in this psalm. Let this cup pass from Me, but not My will, but Your will be done. And we know that the Father's will was that His Son would drink the cup of God's wrath for us. As He died, He drunk what was your due. And so, we can read these verses, solemn and somber though they are, with the assurance that this is not a cup that this is not a cup that we will have to drink. We can drink, but we thank God drink from the cup of salvation that the psalmist speaks of and that we sometimes sing of. So, the earth quakes. And as we so often quake with it, we must remember that God acts. He acts with justice and equity, and we can rest in that confidence. When the earth and all its people quake, we as God's people are assured by the truth that our God is near, that our God is in control, that our God acts. And in the light of this, what must be our response? Well, we can do no better than echo the response of the psalmist as he considered and discovered and was reminded of these truths. How did the psalmist respond?

Well, he responded with thanksgiving. He responded with praise. Indeed, the psalm begins and ends with the psalmist thanking and praising God for being the God that He is. We give thanks to You, O God. We give thanks for Your name is near. And in verse 9, as for me, as for me, as I consider these great truths concerning my God, as for me, I will declare this forever. I will sing praise to the God of Jacob. That is how we must also respond. We live in an earth that quakes, but we worship a God who is near, a God who is in control, a God who acts. And as we recognize that to be so, we can do no other than to give thanks to such a God, to praise His name, to declare these truths concerning Him, that others too might hear and discover and know our God. Pray that we would indeed so respond. Let us pray.

Have a good day.