



## Psalm 76 - Israel's God—Judge of All the Earth

To the leader: with stringed instruments. A Psalm of Asaph. A Song.

### Introduction

This is a hymn celebrating Zion as the place God has chosen to dwell and the capital of the people he has chosen to bless and protect; it is a companion to Psalms 46, 48, 87 and 122. The psalm is suited to an occasion in which God has delivered Zion from invaders. The congregation that sings this will marvel at the privilege of going to Zion and worshipping there, and will thank God for it.

Asaph was the great singer and musician of David and Solomon's era; 1 Chronicles 25:1 and 2 Chronicles 29:30 add that Asaph was a prophet in his musical compositions. This psalm celebrates a great victory of God on behalf of his people, and those who connect it with the defeat of Sennacherib (Isaiah 37:36) attribute Psalm 77 to a later Asaph, or to someone who was the literal or spiritual descendant of the Asaph of David and Solomon's time.

### Psalm 76:1-2 - God Has Made His Abode in Zion

The maker of heaven and earth, to whom all mankind belongs, has chosen one people, Judah (which here represents all Israel), and one particular place called Salem or Zion, both names for Jerusalem, to be his dwelling place. The OT is clear that this does not confine God in any way: <<***But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built! Have regard to your servant's prayer and his plea, O Lord my God, heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today; that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house, the place of which you said, "My name shall be there", that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place. Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling-place; heed and forgive***>> (1 Kings 8:27-30), and: <<***Thus says the Lord: Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool;***

*what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting-place? All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord. But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word>>* (Isaiah 66:1-2); rather, it is the means by which his people have access to his presence.

- <sup>1</sup> In Judah God is known,  
his name is great in Israel.
- <sup>2</sup> His abode has been established in Salem,  
his dwelling-place in Zion.

### Psalm 76:1-2

In Judah God is known. Asaph happily proclaimed that God was known in Judah and that his name is great in Israel. God would get the praise due to him among his people. Note that God is known, that he has revealed himself. God is knowable, and human knowledge of God is not only subjective. Believers do not worship an unknown god as the ancient Athenians did: *<<For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, "To an unknown god." What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you>>* (Acts 17:23). Note that: in Judah God is known. The nations had their ideas of deity but the true revelation of God came through the Jewish people - the covenant descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In those days, if someone wanted to know who God was and what he was like, they had to turn to the Jews and their Scriptures.

His abode has been established in Salem. God has a further connection with Israel; it is in their land that he chose to make his dwelling-place and to establish his tabernacle. Asaph's mention of God's abode, i.e. the tabernacle, might be a reference to history, or perhaps poetic, although the tabernacle was not brought to Salem, to the city of Zion, when David brought the Ark of the Covenant there; refer to 2 Samuel Chapter 6.

It seems that Salem was the ancient name for Jerusalem: *<<And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High>>* (Genesis 14:18), and: *<<This 'King Melchizedek of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham as he was returning from defeating the kings and blessed him'; and to him Abraham apportioned 'one-tenth of everything'. His name, in the first place, means 'king of righteousness'; next he is also king of Salem, that is, 'king of peace'>>* (Hebrews 7:1-2).

### Psalm 76:3-9 - None Can Stand before You When You Rise to Judge.

The past-tense verbs show that this psalm is particularly geared to celebrating an occasion in which God has protected Zion from Gentile invaders: he broke their flashing arrows, the stout-hearted Gentile warriors were stripped of their spoil, rider and horse lay stunned. Verses 6-9 trace the victory to God's rebuke, his judgement and his plan to save all the humble of the earth, i.e. the faithful among his people. This could refer to the deliverance from King Sennacherib's Assyrian army: <<*That very night the angel of the Lord set out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies*>> (2 Kings 19:35), but the words are general enough for other occasions, and there is no reason to tie this psalm to that event over any other, for: <<*He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear; he burns the shields with fire*>> (Psalm 46:9).

- <sup>3</sup> There he broke the flashing arrows,  
the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war. Selah
- <sup>4</sup> Glorious are you, more majestic  
than the everlasting mountains.
- <sup>5</sup> The stout-hearted were stripped of their spoil;  
they sank into sleep;  
none of the troops  
was able to lift a hand.
- <sup>6</sup> At your rebuke, O God of Jacob,  
both rider and horse lay stunned.

### Psalm 76:3-6

There he broke the flashing arrows. Jerusalem became the centre of Israel when David conquered the city and brought peace to 'the city of peace'; refer to 2 Samuel 5:6-10. In many ways before and after, God breaks the weapons of those set against him and his people.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect.

Glorious are you, more majestic than the everlasting mountains. Asaph thought of the beauty and the bounty of these everlasting mountains of prey, the place

remote and wild enough to be home to wild animals. He knew that the Lord God was more glorious and excellent than these beautiful places. The reader might imagine Asaph hiking in the high mountains where the wild goats, the ibex and other wild animals lived. He is stunned by their beauty but goes on to think: “Our God is more glorious and excellent than even these mountains.”

The stout-hearted were stripped of their spoil. Charles Spurgeon commented, “They came to spoil, and lo! they are spoiled themselves. Their stout hearts are cold in death, the angel of the pestilence has dried up their life-blood, their very heart is taken from them.”

None of the troops was able to lift a hand. The God who is greater than the mountains also helped his people in battle. He helped them by confounding their enemies who were sunk into their sleep, i.e. they died: <<*Consider and answer me, O Lord my God! Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep the sleep of death*>> (Psalm 13:3).

Both rider and horse lay stunned. Moses rejoiced when God performed this very act on the Egyptian army: <<*Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: ‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea’*>> (Exodus 15:1). Again Spurgeon commented, “The Israelites always had a special fear of horses and scythed chariots; and, therefore, the sudden stillness of the entire force of the enemy in this department is made the theme of special rejoicing.”

7 But you indeed are awesome!  
Who can stand before you  
when once your anger is roused?  
8 From the heavens you uttered judgement;  
the earth feared and was still  
9 when God rose up to establish judgement,  
to save all the oppressed of the earth. Selah

#### Psalm 76:7-9

But you indeed are awesome! Awesome in Hebrew is more accurately ‘terrible,’ filling the hearts of his opponents with terror and fear. Asaph thought of the importance of giving honour and reverence - a healthy fear - to the great God. He emphasised the personal aspect of it; that God himself is to be feared, more than the things he may do.

Who can stand before you when once your anger is roused? Respect and reverence to God goes beyond admiration of his greatness. It is also connected to the believer's knowledge of his righteousness, his power and his authority as judge: <<*Lord, the God of Israel, you are righteous! We are left this day as a remnant. Here we are before you in our guilt, though because of it not one of us can stand in your presence*>> (Ezra 9:15 NIV), and: <<*for the great day of their wrath has come, and who is able to stand?*>> (Revelation 6:17). They understand that God is the best friend and the worst enemy.

When God rose up to establish judgement, to save all the oppressed of the earth. God uses his righteous might not primarily to defend himself but to deliver all the oppressed. He cares about the poor and needy, and every wrong will be set right or recompensed when God rises to judgement.

### Psalm 76:10-12 - Let All the People Praise the Lord.

Since God gets praise even out of the schemes of unjust men, it is only right that his favoured ones worship and love him. The wrath of man shall praise him, i.e. the way that God thwarts their wrathful schemes leads people to acknowledge God's rule.

- 10 Human wrath serves only to praise you,  
when you bind the last bit of your wrath around you.
- 11 Make vows to the Lord your God, and perform them;  
let all who are around him bring gifts  
to the one who is awesome,
- 12 who cuts off the spirit of princes,  
who inspires fear in the kings of the earth.

### Psalm 76:10-12

Human wrath serves only to praise you. Asaph just considered the judgements of God and how God uses his judgement to deliver the oppressed (v.9). In this the psalmist sees the matchless wisdom and providence of God, who can work all things together so marvellously that he will make the wrath of man to bring him praise. Spurgeon's view here is, "It shall not only be overcome but rendered subservient to thy glory. Man with his breath of threatening is but blowing the trumpet of the Lord's eternal fame."

The Bible and history are filled with the fulfilment of this promise and principle. As seen in the Book of Esther, Haman was filled with wrath against Mordecai; God used the wrath of Haman to bring himself praise. The religious

leaders of Jesus' day were filled with wrath against God's own Son; God used the wrath of the religious leaders to bring himself praise. This principle is fulfilled in history; by faith Christians should believe it to be so today when men show their wrath against God and his people.

When you bind the last bit of your wrath around you. God will even adorn himself with the 'leftovers' of man's wrath against him and his people. This in no way justifies the wrath of man, but it does show the surpassing greatness of God. The phrase you bind the last bit of your wrath around you is obscure; by virtue of the parallelism, it probably means that God takes the last futile efforts of human wrath and wears it like an ornamental belt, extracting every last bit of honour from it. Another possibility sees the remnant of wrath as the survivors of wrath, whom God attaches to his belt; but this makes less of a parallel with the first line.

Other translations give a different sense of this difficult Hebrew phrase:

- <<*And the survivors of your wrath are restrained*>> (NIV).
- <<*The residue of wrath thou wilt gird upon thee*>> (RSV).

If the Hebrew text is to be understood in this sense, then the idea is that God promises to restrain the wrath of man. First comes the promise to bring good out of even the wrath of man, then is the promise to restrain that wrath.

Make vows to the Lord your God, and perform them. Asaph brought a logical conclusion to the facts presented. If God is this great, then his people owe their vows to him, and vows made should be paid. Spurgeon commented, "To vow or not is a matter of choice, but to discharge our vows is our bounden duty. He who would defraud God, his own God, is a wretch indeed."

Let all who are around him bring gifts to the one who is awesome. Christians can and should honour God with more than their vows. In humble submission they should bring their gifts and offerings to him, giving him their first and their best.

Who inspires fear in the kings of the earth. Even the princes and the kings of the earth can and should see the awe of this great God. They should keep their vows to him and bring presents to honour him. No one is excluded from the reverence and praise of the great God and King. Again Spurgeon commented, "None are great in his hand. Cæsars and Napoleons fall under his power as the boughs of the tree beneath the woodman's axe."

The expression who inspires fear, referring to God, is two-edged: God's people fear him in reverential love, while the Gentile kings fear him because he cuts off the spirit of princes, although the OT hope is that the Gentiles will one day come to fear him in the first way: <<*For the scripture says to Pharaoh, 'I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth'*>> (Romans 9:17).