

July 8/9, 2006

God Is the Final Judge

Psalm 75

Pastor Bryan Clark

Frank Sinatra, at Carnegie Hall, sang a song that in essence defined his creed in life: "I did it 'My Way.'" He introduced it as the national anthem, and I think in many ways he is right. It is the embodiment of what we call the American spirit. People consider it bold. People consider it courageous—almost as if it is virtuous.

Several years ago I was sitting down with a family planning the funeral of a loved one, and they asked me if it would be okay to have that song sung at the funeral. Now typically at a funeral I'm very accommodating. This is a loved one that has died, and I do allow a great deal of latitude. But I said, "I just can't go there." I said, "You have to understand that song represents everything that is the opposite of what I have been called to be about as a preacher of the Gospel. And I can't in good conscience do that." I said, "If that's how this person lived his life, then so be it. But to celebrate it as something good and virtuous, I just can't do that." We had a good discussion, and they ultimately agreed.

If you go back to Genesis 3, there really is a fork in the road. There are two roads, and every person that will ever draw breath travels one road or the other. One of those roads might well be called "my way." *I will be my own god. I will decide for myself what is right and wrong, what is good and what is evil. Nobody is going to tell me what to do. I'm going to do it my way.* Jesus said in the New Testament that the majority of people that ever live will travel that road.

The second road would be a road of submission and surrender to God: an acknowledgment I am not God, that He's God. *I am desperately in need of a Savior, and in humility I submit and surrender to Him. I will travel His path. He's God, and He will tell me what to do.*

It's important to realize there are a lot of very religious people on the road called "my way." Just because people acknowledge God and go to church doesn't mean they're on the other path. A lot of religious people on "my way" visit God on Sunday. And God is there in case of a crisis. But day in and day out, they live their lives their way.

Psalm 75 tells us that perhaps the most disastrous decision we could ever make in life is to choose to travel the pathway called "my way." If you have a Bible, turn with me to Psalm 75. It is a psalm of Asaph. Asaph was a worship leader in Israel and wrote about a dozen of the psalms.

Psalm 73 is a psalm of Asaph where he asked the question, "Why does it seem like the wicked prosper and the righteous struggle?" As a matter of fact, he struggled with that so much he said he almost crashed and burned.

In Psalm 74 he asked the question, "God, how long are You going to let this go on? It seems like everything is upside-down. It seems like the wicked have their way and the righteous struggle. How long does it have to be this way?" Psalm 75 is in essence the answer to that question.

Several years ago during the Summer Olympics there was an American distance runner that captured the hearts of many Americans. It was just one of those human interest stories that seem to stick. I remember one day walking into the house and Patti and the girls were watching the Summer Olympics. It happened to be the medal round that this particular runner was running in.

The gun went off and the runners began to run the race, and he immediately fell behind. Patti was kind of coaxing him on and was a little frustrated with this. And I was saying things like, "You know, I can just tell by the way he's running, he's gonna win." He fell farther behind, and I was saying things like, "Look at the way he's relaxed. Look at the way he's striding. You can just tell, if you know what you're looking for, he's in perfect shape. He's gonna win." I said a lot of things like that, that were basically meaningless, but they sounded really impressive.

Of course, by the end of the race he won the gold medal. And Patti looked at me and said, "How did you *know* that?" I said, "Oh, I heard it on the news earlier today." The television was on a time delay. (Don't try that at home, by the way.)

Psalm 75 is in essence a look at the end of the race and a chance to see how the race ends. We're living in real time. And sometimes it does seem like the wicked prosper and the righteous struggle. But as we've said many times, what difference does it make if you're winning at halftime, if you end up losing the game? This is halftime, but God in His grace has given us a glimpse at the end of the race and says, "Just don't forget this is how it all ends." Knowing that should dramatically affect how we process life today.

Verse 1:

We give thanks to You, O God, we give thanks, for Your name is near; men declare Your wondrous works. (Psalm 75:1, *NASB)

I think the best way to understand verse 1 is to work it backwards. It starts with a declaration of the wondrous works of God. He's talking there about the times when God intervenes in human history. For the Hebrew people, they rehearse or declare that God has intervened in their world over and over again. God parted the Red Sea. God fed them manna in the desert. God parted the Jordan River. God dropped the walls of Jericho. God gave them this victory and that victory. They would over and over again rehearse God-sightings among them.

What happens is it brings God near, which is the second phrase in that verse. The ancient world believed that there were multiple gods, and they were all way out there somewhere. The Hebrew people were unique in that they believed they had a God who was near, a God who actually was involved in their daily affairs. And they would remind themselves of that as they rehearsed the God-sightings among them. That brings God near.

It's the same thing for us today. There are times when it seems like God is way out there somewhere. It almost seems like God is indifferent, like He doesn't care. But then we get a God-sighting among us and we remember: *Hey, God does care, and God is among us. God is putting marriages back together. God is healing diseases. God is changing lives.* There are God-sightings among us that say: *God is here and God dwells among His people.* So because of that they give thanks. And that's the beginning of the verse.

To those who are walking down the pathway of submission and surrender to God, the intimate involvement of God is good news. It's a good thing that God knows everything about our lives—because God knows when we fall, and He picks us up. God knows when we're despairing, and He gives us hope. God walks with us hand-in-hand down the road to get to the finish line. That's good news.

But to those who are walking down the pathway called "my way," that's a horrifying thought. They want to believe that God doesn't know. They want to believe that God doesn't care. They want to

believe that God shrugs it off. They want to believe that God is indifferent. They don't want to believe that God knows every thought, every motive, and every action. And when they choose to do it their way, they want to believe that God, somewhere in the distance, shrugs and says, "Whatever."

Verse 1 then sets up the Psalm, which begins then with the message in verse 2:

"When I select an appointed time, it is I who judge with equity."

It is God speaking in verse 2. Asaph asked the question in Psalm 74, "God, how long?" And God says, "When it's My time." God doesn't operate according to our timetable; He operates according to His timetable. And He says, "When it is My time, I will step forth and I will judge. And I will judge with equity." Equity means no loopholes, no 'innocent by reason of insanity,' no getting off—just pure accountability.

The judgment of God is an interesting thing to think about. God describes Himself as being gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abundant in lovingkindness. But don't mistake that for indifference. Don't mistake that for God not knowing or caring. God reminds us: *Hey, there is coming a day when there will be accountability.*

From cover to cover, the Bible is about redemption. The Bible is about salvation. There are a lot of preachers today that just want to stick with the positive. But salvation makes no sense without an awareness of what we're being saved from. You talk to people today about being saved, and that's their response: "Saved from what?" "Saved from the condemnation of God's wrath." You can't really embrace the doctrine of salvation without embracing the reality of judgment and condemnation. Otherwise, what are we being saved from? What's the good news there?

If you take it a step further, God, knowing exactly what that wrath will look like, was even Himself so horrified by that thought, that He Himself became flesh and hung on a cross in order to provide salvation so people could experience His salvation rather than His wrath. So whatever it is we're being saved from, it's so bad that God Himself gave His life to save us from it. The reality is, there has to be a doctrine of judgment and condemnation to have a doctrine of salvation. Otherwise, what are we being saved from?

In verse 2 God says, "It is I..." The wording is a little bit odd, but in the Hebrew it's an emphatic "I," which is God's way of saying, "It's nobody else. It's Me. It is I. I'll be the judge, nobody else."

There are certain things that have to be true of God or He's not God. Can God really be God if He's not in charge? The very definition of God is He's God. The very definition of God is He's in charge and He's the judge. He's ultimately the one to whom we're accountable. I mean, that's just the definition of God.

At Easter we were talking about Nietzsche and Nietzsche's declaration that God is dead. Between the services I actually had a nice conversation with a young man in the hallway who identified himself as an agnostic. He said to me, "You know, you and Nietzsche aren't that far apart, because Nietzsche believed there was a God; it's just that God died." And my answer to him was, "Any God that dies was never God to begin with." The very definition of God is He's God; He's eternal; He's in charge; He's the judge. That's God.

Verse 3:

"The earth and all who dwell in it melt; it is I who have firmly set its pillars."

The word “melt” there is a Hebrew word that can be translated “melt,” and that is a biblical imagery that one day God with His fire will melt everything away, and all that will remain are the things of God. But because this Psalm is followed with a statement about the pillars of God, the Hebrew word can also be translated (instead of “melt), “shaken” or “totter” or “crumble.” I think that’s the better imagery in this particular verse.

What is being said is that no matter how hard people traveling the pathway called “my way” try to build their own “tower of Babel”—their own monument to their belief that they are their own god—that one day God is going to shake the earth and it will all come crumbling down. And only the pillars that God has erected will remain.

I’ll give you a little visual this morning. [Lifts up a snow globe with a city inside.] Basically what Asaph is trying to create in that verse is a picture like this. This is the earth. This is God holding the earth. And He watches down on earth. People travel this pathway called “my way,” and He watches them try for thousands of years to build their own “tower of Babel” as a monument to man’s greatness. But what Asaph is saying is, “At an appointed time—one flick of the wrist from God—and it’s gone. It all comes crashing down and all that’s left are those pillars that God has built.”

If you want to paint a little bit of a picture, let’s imagine that God is looking into this globe at Carnegie Hall. He’s looking onto the stage and there’s Frank Sinatra singing, “I Did It My Way.” And about halfway through the song, God says “I’ve had just about enough of this.” And with one flick of His wrist, Frank Sinatra is thrown across the room, Carnegie is dropped, and it’s all gone—and all that remains are the things of God.

That’s why we constantly remind ourselves to live for the things that are eternal. There is coming a day when, with one flick of the wrist, God will crumble everything but those pillars that He Himself has built. As a matter of fact, the verse is so sobering it’s followed with the word “Selah,” which most likely means, “Just stop and think about that for a minute”—because that’s the imagery that the psalmist is painting.

Verse 4:

“I said to the boastful, ‘Do not boast,’ and to the wicked, ‘Do not lift up the horn.’”

This is still God speaking. God is looking down onto earth, to those people traveling this pathway called “my way.” And He’s saying to them, “Stop that.” He says to the boastful, or the arrogant—those people that think they can do it their way, those people that think they are their own gods—He says, “Stop singing that.”

To the wicked (the wicked would be anyone who refuses God’s way of salvation) He says, “Don’t lift up your horn.” A horn was always symbolic of power. Imagine a big ram with that big horn. That’s his symbol of power. We would probably say today, “Don’t shake your fist at Me.” God is looking at people on that road and He’s saying, “Stop that.”

“Do not lift up your horn on high,” [He’s saying, “Don’t shake your fist at Me. Don’t challenge Me to a fight. You’re not God.”] **“Do not speak with insolent pride.”** (Psalm 75:5)

The word “pride” there is “a stiff neck.” God doesn’t want people to experience His wrath. That’s why He provided a way of salvation. But He looks down onto this globe and sees people traveling this path called “my way.” They’re singing their theme song, and God is saying to them, “Stop that.”

You can't do it your way. Don't shake your fist at Me. Don't challenge Me to a fight. You can't win. I'm God. Stop that." That's the imagery that Asaph creates in this particular Psalm.

Verse 6:

For not from the east, nor from the west, nor from the desert comes exaltation.

Verse 6 is a really interesting verse. What it basically means is that exaltation doesn't come from men and women on the earth. It only comes from God. See, this is a problem when we travel this pathway called "my way." We convince ourselves we are our own gods. Then we cultivate a mutual admiration society. We say, "Hey, I think you're great." You say, "No, no, I think you're great." And we convince ourselves we are great, and we exalt one another.

But what the psalmist is saying is, "Hey, there is no exaltation on earth. The only opinion that matters is God's. The rest is just a silly game."

If you want to get a good visual of how we do this, picture in your mind a scene outside of the Academy Awards. Thousands of people gather, hoping to catch just a glimpse of these remarkable people. They pull up in limousines. They get out on a red carpet. Flashbulbs are going off, incredibly expensive clothing. They grant the little people a moment to catch a glimpse of them, and then they go inside.

Imagine if someone from outer space came down to watch that event. They would ask the question: "What remarkable thing have these people done to be treated that way?" "Well, you see, they get in front of a camera and they pretend to be somebody else." But that is the value system of our culture: These are celebrities; they are something.

But God looks down at that and watches that whole scene. And He says, "What are you people doing? What kind of a ridiculous game is that? That's a mutual admiration society. That's something you made up." It's not God's opinion, and it certainly doesn't impress God.

But you know, maybe even more disturbing than that is what we see in our Christian subculture. It seems to me what we see in our Christian subculture looks an awful lot like that same value system. With the rise of television and Christian publishing houses and radio ministries, now we have Christian celebrities. And the environments look very much like what happens outside of the Academy Awards.

When you think about what Jesus did for us on the cross and the horror of that event—and then to imagine using that to achieve celebrity status—there's something kind of sick about that. Jesus is the only celebrity among us. We're just sinners saved by grace. God must look at the celebrity culture within Christianity—we have celebrities in the Christian music world; we have celebrities that are authors; we have celebrities on television—He must look at that and say, "What are you people doing? It's a mutual admiration society."

The only opinion that matters is God's. Men and women don't exalt one another. It's God's call. First Peter chapter 5, verse 6, says, "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, and He will exalt you at the proper time."

When I graduated from seminary, I was out on the west coast in the Los Angeles area, and all of my classmates were going to Los Angeles, San Diego, Sacramento. "Bryan, where are you going?" *Going to Broken Bow, Nebraska.* And the more I said that, the more it bothered me. *God, what's up with this? I mean, have I done something wrong? Am I being punished here?* You come out of

seminary and you know where you're headed. Eventually you'll make the speaking tour and you'll get your picture on the brochures. If you're lucky, you'll become a Christian celebrity. It usually doesn't happen in Broken Bow, Nebraska.

I remember struggling for a while there, wondering, *What's up with this? God, I feel lost and forgotten. Nobody is going to discover me here.* And I remember it was almost as if God's voice spoke to me and said, *Bryan, is this about you or Me?* I remember 1 Peter 5:6 penetrating my heart: "Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, and He will exalt you at the proper time." And in my own spirit I had to come to a conclusion: *My calling has to be about God, and His opinion is the only opinion that matters.*

I can say with integrity, if God would have left me in Broken Bow for the next 50 years, I was fine with that. But it took me a process to get there. See, the celebrity culture does nobody any good. It's a problem.

When Peter says, "He will exalt you at the proper time," it's also important to understand what he means by that. I don't in any way want to imply that moving from Broken Bow to Lincoln was my exaltation. I don't believe that for a minute. I don't believe it was an advancement. I don't believe it was a step up—just a different calling. To think that now I'm exalted is to buy into the value system of the world all over again. That's not what Peter is saying. As a matter of fact, in God's eyes that day will never come, because that's not what Peter means.

I think Ephesians 2:10 captures it the best: "For you are His workmanship. For you are His masterpiece"—an original piece of art made by His grace. The New Testament teaches that one day Christ will be exalted. And because we are in Christ, we will share in that glory. But it will have nothing to do with me. It will simply be a reflection of who God has made me by His grace.

One day I will be held up in the heavenlies. Every believer will. And I believe the angels will gasp at what I've become. But it will have nothing to do with me. It will not be my exaltation. It will be the exaltation of Christ, and what He has made me by His grace.

One of the things I have to die to is the belief that there will ever come a day when I will be exalted for what I have done. I die to that value system. Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God; and when He exalts Christ, we will be exalted in that—because we are in Christ. That's what this means.

Verse 7:

But God is the Judge; He puts down one and exalts another.

He reminds us, at the end of the day it doesn't matter how much admiration we've poured out on one another. The only opinion that matters is God's. And we need to understand and live that way.

Verse 8 is a very graphic verse:

For a cup is in the hand of the LORD, and the wine foams; it is well mixed, and He pours out of this; surely all the wicked of the earth must drain and drink down its dregs.

In the Old Testament, for the most part, a cup was symbolic of God's wrath. You remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane said, "Father, if this *cup* pass from Me..." It was symbolic of God's

wrath. He got a peek into the horror of God's wrath in the Garden and prayed that somehow that wrath would not have to be poured out upon Him.

The idea of foaming is a word that means "to boil, to ferment, to turn red." The point is it's at full strength. **"It is well mixed."** There is some discussion on what that means—most likely mixed with various spices that would put it at full potency. That is the point here—that the wine is boiled, fermented, mixed. It is full potency—nothing watered down.

God is going to pour that wine down the throats of the wicked, and they will drink every last drop. The dregs are the solid particles that settle in the bottom of the glass that typically would be avoided. But the imagery is, God is going to pour out every drop; they will even drink the dregs at the bottom of the cup. It's a very powerful imagery of God's judgment.

The wicked would be anyone who rejects Jesus as Savior. Yes, God is gracious and He is merciful and He is slow to anger. But there is coming a day when every person who has refused Jesus as Savior will have God's wrath poured down their throat. And they will take every drop. It's a very vivid picture.

In verse 9, Asaph is responding out of that:

But as for me, I will declare it forever; I will sing praises to the God of Jacob.

It's almost like after Asaph processes verse 8, he's quick to say, "Hey, that's not me. I'm not on that path. It's not the choice I've made. I'm on the other path. I'm going to acknowledge God is God. I'm going to surrender to Him. I'm going to experience His salvation."

And all the horns of the wicked He will cut off. (Psalm 75:10a)

God disarms them—no power. Imagine a ram with his horns cut off. If it's shaking your fist at God, they raise up a bloody stump and God has cut the fist off. They're rendered powerless. They're nothing.

But the horns of the righteous will be lifted up. (Psalm 75:10b)

The irony is, those that travel the path called "my way" to be their own gods will one day be humiliated and rendered powerless. But those who humbly submit and surrender to God will one day be exalted with Him forever. It's a very sobering peek at where the story ends, and what we need to be living for.

May 1998, Frank Sinatra died. I can assure you, for the last eight years he has not been doing it his way. He has been awakened to a sobering reality: God is God and God's the Judge.

This Psalm reminds us of the importance of our salvation, because apart from Jesus, that's what we all had coming. Apart from Jesus, God was going to pour His wrath down your throat and mine. That's not what God wants, so He provided a way of salvation.

But it's also a powerful reminder of the fate that awaits those people around us if they don't know Jesus. Click them off in your head: The people you work with, the people you go to school with, the people that live next door. That is their fate, apart from Jesus.

Asaph asked the question, "God, how long are You going to wait?" God waits out of His grace and His mercy, because every day God waits is one more day for someone to receive His salvation. If

God would have come in judgment this morning, there are thousands of people that will come to Jesus today that would have otherwise been lost forever. Because God waited one more day, there are thousands of people on this earth today that will experience salvation rather than wrath.

How long will God wait? Nobody knows. All I know is it's a whole lot closer today than it was when this Psalm was penned. All I know is that we have today. The Psalm says the cup is in His hand. It means He's getting ready to pour it. That's why there has to be a sense of urgency in the mission. I don't know if we have tomorrow. But if God gives us one more day, it may be that that person you go to school with, it may be your neighbor, it may be that that person you work with will have one more chance to experience salvation rather than wrath.

Our Father, we're thankful You are gracious. You are merciful. Every day that You delay Your judgment is one more day where someone can know Your salvation rather than Your wrath. Lord, we're thankful that You are a God who is gracious and merciful, abundant in lovingkindness. But Lord, help us not to be lulled to sleep as if that is indifference. Lord, help us to be diligent about the mission—to recognize that Your wrath is so intense that You Yourself provided a way of salvation. Lord, may we be diligent to be about the mission You've given us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2006 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.