

Sunday 31st January: Psalm 98 – ‘The Judge’

If I asked you to share your favourite thing about God, I wonder what you would say?

Many of us would point to God’s love, or his abiding presence, or his faithfulness, or his comfort and security in testing times. And of course these are all amazing – we rightly rely on these things, especially at the moment.

Very few of us, I suspect, would mention God’s judgement in our top 3 favourite things about God. And yet in today’s psalm, which is one of the great psalms of praise, we find this surprising conclusion: ‘Let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the world. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples with equity.’

And this is not just for the religious, or a particular small group of people like priests – here are the two verses before this one: ‘Let the sea resound and everything in it, the world and all who live in it Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy...’ In other words, let the whole creation – humans and landscape – ‘sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth.’

The joyful praise of the psalmist is located ultimately in the fact that God judges the world. Why? This is strange to our modern ears, isn’t it? And yet it is a consistent theme of the psalms – God’s people are encouraged to praise God as Judge.

Today in a few minutes I’m going to give you two simple reasons why this might actually be a good thing: why it’s not just good that God is judge – we *need* to keep the judgement of God at the heart of our faith.

The first is this: it reminds us that one day God will put everything right. We humans are built with an innate sense of justice: this is God-given because God is just, and so we who bear his image are made to be just, too. But the problem is that our sense of justice is usually one-eyed. You’ll never meet a football fan who howled with rage when their team won a fortunate penalty, only when they conceded an unfortunate one. We love justice when it benefits us.

But God is not like that. God is completely, perfectly, reassuringly just. His judgements are fair and impartial. And one day, he will put everything right.

This matters because there is so much evil in our world. And whilst the legal system in many countries works tirelessly to ensure justice for the victims, it is also true that many of those who commit evil escape justice in this life. It is a great comfort to know that *there will be a divine reckoning: that no-one escapes justice forever.* An estimated 35 million slaves around the world need to know that. The millions of people trafficked into prostitution and forced labour need to know that. The innocent casualties of other peoples’ wars need to know that. The populations who are starving because of the corruption of their leaders need to know that.

God cares about justice. But it’s not enough for God just to be just in himself. Justice needs action in the form of judgement. There has to be a reckoning. I want to praise God today because he

does and will come to judge the earth, because it reminds me that all the evil that I feel so powerless to stop *will* one day be stopped, and every victim will receive the justice they deserve.

Second, God cannot be merciful unless he is just. We love to talk about the mercy of God, but sometimes bypass why God has to be merciful in the first place. Unless God rightly judges all the fallenness of our world he cannot then be merciful. And the good news of our faith is that he is merciful – wonderfully merciful! ‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.’

John Newton, the reformed slave trader, wrote those famous words – but we don’t need to have trafficked slaves to echo those words in our hearts. Deep down, we all know that our lives don’t match up to what we know we can be, what God made us to be. There is darkness inside us as well as light, and we will all stand before God in need of help.

But there is help. And this is our good news, isn’t it? When God judges the world, he does not leave it without an escape route, a way to freedom and wholeness. If the psalm ends with judgement, look where it *begins*: ‘Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made his salvation known, and revealed his righteousness to the nations.’ **God judges, yes – but God also saves.**

These words were written hundreds of years before Jesus, but they prophetically echo God’s solution. Jesus comes to our world and does ‘marvellous things’, before ultimately working God’s salvation through the cross. This is where God’s perfect justice and perfect mercy meet. As a human Jesus can represent us before God. As God, Jesus has the perfection and righteousness to act as our Saviour on our behalf. God judges our fallenness and selfishness on the cross by taking it upon himself in the form of Jesus. Justice is served, but we can now receive it as mercy.

To follow Jesus means that God’s judgement has already been enacted on our behalf. Whilst we will still stand before God again one day, we no longer need to fear that, because Christ vouches for us. We are with Christ now, we are fully forgiven, and his righteousness is our reward. Hallelujah!

This is a promise for the whole world, for all people for all time. Mercy triumphs over judgement!

So today, let’s recover the value of God as Judge. It means God puts things right: that evil will not go unpunished forever, that truth and grace and righteousness will one day win, and be our reality for all time.

And the perfectly just judgement of God also leads to his incredible mercy, as in Christ God offers his beautiful salvation to each one of us.

Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing. Lord Jesus, gentle Saviour and Judge, thank you for your loving mercy. Come to my heart today, forgive my sin and selfishness, and dwell with me forever, Amen.