

Psalm 92
Psalm 92
Matthew 21:1-17

“A Song for the Sabbath”

November 5, 2017

Introduction: A Song for the Sabbath

Psalm 92 is a song for the Sabbath.

This title has puzzled some,
because there is nothing in the song that explicitly talks about Sabbath.
But when you think about Psalm 92 in the context of Book 4 of the Psalter,
it begins to make sense.

After all, there is no Son of David on the throne.

The temple has been destroyed.
Maybe, by the time Book 4 was compiled, the temple had been rebuilt,
but we know that after Exile,
the Jews began to emphasize the Sabbath in a new way.

The Sabbath command goes all the way back to Creation,
when God blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it – he made it holy.
All the other ways that we count time are based on the rhythms of nature –
months are based on the cycles of the moon,
days and years are based on the cycles of the sun.
But weeks are based on God’s own work of creation.

The Sabbath is based on God’s mighty deeds in forming the all things of nothing,
by the word of his power,
in the space of six days,
and all very good.

And (as we will see in Psalm 95), God called his people to enter his rest.
The call for Israel to enter the Promised Land is a sort of Sabbath.
But Israel failed to enter God’s rest –
and that’s why Jesus came –
because Jesus is the one who entered God’s rest
on the eighth day – on the first day of the new creation.

That’s why Christians have always observed the eighth day – Sunday –
as our day of worship – as the day when we enter God’s rest.

And while there are many Psalms that *could* have been titled this,
it is important and useful for us to see why *this Psalm*
is particularly suited for the Sabbath.

Sing Psalm 92
Read Matthew 21:1-17

In the coming of Jesus to Jerusalem in Matthew 21,
you see the coming of the Son of David –
you see the coming of the One who had been missing from Jerusalem for 600 years.

We just celebrated the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.
We tend to think of Martin Luther as being *so long ago*...

But for the Jews, it had been *even longer* since they last had a Son of David on the throne.

And when something takes a long time to happen
it can get easy to be distracted by other things.

Where would you have been in Matthew 21?

Maybe you see yourself as one of the disciples – busy about the Lord's commands –
seeking to make all things ready for the Lord Jesus.

Maybe you are among the crowd –
you haven't paid much attention to Jesus –
he's an interesting figure – but not directly relevant to your daily life,
but now, on Palm Sunday, you are here praising Jesus!

Or maybe you have been so distracted with the cares of the week
that you are among the money-changers –

forgetting about the purpose of the temple,
and so Jesus comes charging in and disrupts your life!

I hope that you are not among the chief priests and scribes who grumble against Jesus –
and are indignant that the children are declaring his praise!!

Psalms 92 calls us to orient our whole life around this Jesus –
and to do so in the context of the Sabbath.

1 It Is Good to Give Thanks to the LORD (v1-3)

*It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to your name, O Most High;
² to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
³ to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.*

The language used in verse 2 of declaring God's steadfast love in the morning
and his faithfulness by night –
reminds us of the morning and evening prayers that were offered in the temple –
especially on the Sabbath day.

In addition to the regular offerings that were offered every day,
there are special Sabbath offerings for the 7th day.

And the reason why I say “at the temple” is because there is only one place in Israel’s worship
where you will find the music of the lute and harp,
the melody of the lyre –
and that place is the temple.

Musical instruments were never used in the synagogue –
and for that matter, you never find musical instruments in Christian worship
for a thousand years after the time of Christ.

Let me say this very clearly:
the apostles did not use instruments in worship –
and neither did the early Fathers.

For a thousand years, the church was *unanimous* in its practice.
(There are very few things that find such unanimous consent in the early church!)

Of course, our passage today says that it is *good* to praise the name of the LORD
“to the music of the lute and harp” –
so we should understand *first* why the early church did *not* use instruments,
but also *why* we *do*!

The early church unanimously refused to use musical instruments.

They used two basic arguments:

First, musicians in the Greek world generally played for pagan feasts and orgies.

So musical instruments were associated with idolatry and adultery.

If the early Fathers thought like modern evangelicals,

they would have tried to “redeem” Greek music and use it in the church.

But they didn’t.

Greek musical theory saw music in terms of physics.

Music has great power over the emotions

because of its physical properties.

And so music can be used to manipulate people

to get them to feel a certain way –

simply by the sounds that they hear.

The early Fathers understood this –

and that’s *why* they didn’t want to use instruments!

They didn’t want to manipulate emotions by means of music –

they wanted the truth of the gospel to take root in the heart.

But some might say, what about Psalm 92?!!

What about Psalm 150?!

The Psalms themselves speak of instruments!

And that’s where we need to hear their second argument:

Second, they saw the musical instruments of the temple
as inextricably bound to the sacrifices of the temple.
When you go back and look at *when* were the Psalms sung in the temple,
you regularly find them sung (with instruments)
at the morning and evening sacrifice
(for instance, Psalm 92,
“to declare your steadfast love in the morning,
and your faithfulness by night,
to the music of the lute and the harp...”)

And so the Fathers said
that because the instruments were used to accompany the sacrifices of the OT,
therefore, since Christ *is* our once-for-all sacrifice,
we should not use instruments in worship.

John Chrysostom explained it this way:
“just as he allowed sacrifices, so too did he permit instruments,
making concession to their weakness” (in McKinnon, 83)

And so they interpreted these passages as applying to the church.
John Chrysostom said,
“Here there is no need of the cithara, nor taut strings,
nor the plectrum and technique, nor any sort of instrument;
but if you wish, make of yourself a cithara,
by mortifying the limbs of the flesh
and creating full harmony between body and soul.
For when the flesh does not lust against the spirit, but yields to its commands,
and perseveres along the path that is noble and admirable,
you thus produce a spiritual melody” (quoted in McKinnon, 81).

In other words, the Fathers saw musical instruments as a part of the temple service –
a temple service that pointed forward to its fulfillment in the *church*.
If the church is the new temple –
and particularly, if the *body* of Christ is the new temple –
then what is the musical instrument of the body?

The voice.

The human voice is the fulfillment of the instruments of the OT temple.

Now, before you dismiss this as crazy talk –
think about the heavenly worship in the book of Revelation:
“I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet” (1:10)
Or the 24 elders in Rev. 5:8,
“each holding a harp, and golden bowls full of incense,

which are the prayers of the saints”

Some think that it is only the bowls of incense that are the prayers of the saints,
but others have said that *both* the harp and the bowls are the prayers of the saints.

This is why many of the Fathers spoke of the church as a well-tuned harp,
played by the Lord Jesus.

And this is how the church interpreted Psalm 92 (and the other passages like it)
for more than a thousand years.

So why do *we* use instruments?

Well, in the high middle ages, a number of monasteries began to suggest
that we could recover the Greek musical tradition
and apply it to church music.

The idea was this:

It's *true* that the musical instruments of the OT point us to the human voice.
But if that is the case,
then perhaps it would be useful to use those instruments
to point us to the human voice!

Now there is also another, very practical reason for the change.

In the ancient world, instruments were not used much to *accompany* singing.

In the *temple*, it could be done because you had trained singers and musicians.

The Levitical choir would have done most of the singing –
and all of the musicians were *full-time* musicians (this was their job!)
and so the performance of these psalms would have been quite a production!

But in the ancient world, there wasn't much *congregational* singing,
and what congregational singing did exist tended to be in the form of responses.

So, for instance, in the early church,
they didn't have full-time choirs and musicians!
And so the singing of the psalms takes a very different form.

Many patristic preachers make reference to the “people's part” of the Psalm,
so, for Psalm 118, the people's part was
“This is the day the LORD has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

That became the refrain which the congregation would chant
in response to the verses, which would be chanted by the cantor.

In the early church, you would generally have a solo voice chanting the Psalm,
with the congregation chanting the refrain.

Now, if you only have a solo voice chanting,
a musical instrument would drown out the chant.

And for that matter, musical instruments are not all that useful in accompanying chant –
and until the middle ages, chant was the only sort of singing that was used in the church.
Four-part harmony simply *didn't exist* until the later middle ages.

But with the development of church music in the middle ages,
it became possible to think of instruments as useful for accompaniment,
in order to *help* the human voice.

So we would argue that musical instruments are not *necessary*
but they are *useful* for accompanying congregational song.

I rarely bring this much church history into a sermon,
but I think that it was important to see *how different* the ancient world was from our own,
so that when Psalm 92 speaks of singing praises to the music of the lute and harp,
it is describing such a very different practice than what we are doing today.

What I find remarkable is that the church has gone to such great lengths
throughout *all* her history,
to make a point of singing these ancient Psalms.
Whether it was in the temple with the full-time choirs and musicians,
or in the early church with cantors and refrains,
but urging the congregation to learn the Psalm by heart,
so that they could sing it at home!
Or in the Reformation with the development of the metrical Psalm,
so that the whole congregation could sing the whole Psalm.

Because plainly, Psalm 92 declares that it is *good* to give thanks to the LORD.

2 For You Have Made Me Glad by Your Work (v4-5)

And verses 4-5 then give the reason for *why* we sing for joy.
Why?

⁴ *For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work;
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.*

⁵ *How great are your works, O LORD!
Your thoughts are very deep!*

What are these works?

Verses 4-5 only tell us that God's works make me glad –
at the works of your hands I sing for joy.

If you want to know what the works *are* – keep singing –
because the chiasmic form of the poem only reveals the works

on the backside of the chiasm!

Here on the front side of the chiasm,
the focus is on the reception of God's works.
I receive them with joy.
You have made me glad by your work.

And your thoughts are very deep.
Why does he use the word *deep*?

Well, just consider God's works at a superficial level!
In the context of the opening of Book IV of the Psalter,
The temple is destroyed.
The Davidic King is in exile.
The people of God are scattered hither and yon.

Or take the Bible as a whole:
God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son.
Moses spends 40 years in the wilderness –
only to spend *another* 40 years in the wilderness,
after Israel's rebellion!
The Judges form a downward spiral into chaos and rebellion.
David spends years running away from Saul –
and then later in his life, has to run away from his own son!
And most poignantly,
when God sends his own Son in our flesh,
he abandons him to the shameful death of the cross.

"Your thoughts are very deep."
This sets up the rest of the Psalm – and especially verses 6-7:

3 The Fool Cannot Understand the Doom of the Wicked (6-7)

⁶ *The stupid man cannot know;
the fool cannot understand this:*
⁷ *that though the wicked sprout like grass
and all evildoers flourish,
they are doomed to destruction forever;*

The "stupid" man is the "brute" –
the one who thinks in mere fleshly terms.
He is only concerned for his animal appetites.
He is focused on food, sex, and pleasure.
And he thinks that these things are all that really matter.

The "fool" says in his heart, "There is no God."

The fool is more of a thinker than the brute.
But his thinking does not lead him to wisdom.

The brute is the modern jock.
The fool is the modern atheist.

But neither one pays attention to the deep things of God.
They look at the fate of David's house – and their verdict is:
 “Wow, trusting in the LORD really messed them up!”
They look at Jesus on the cross and say,
 “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now!”

Verses 7 and 9 are the two triplets in our poem.

All the other verses are couplets.

 Like in verse 6 – “the stupid man cannot know;
 the fool cannot understand this”

But verse 7 is a triplet:

 “that though the wicked sprout like grass
 and all evildoers flourish,
 they are doomed to destruction.”

The effect of the triplet is to highlight the last line.

 The first two lines of the triplet are parallel to each other.

 The wicked sprouting like grass.
 All evildoers flourishing.

This is the superficial verdict on God's great deeds.

 It sure looks like the wicked are doing really well!

 But they do not know that “they are doomed to destruction forever.”

How do we know this?

4 But You, O LORD, Are on High Forever (v8)

⁸ *but you, O LORD, are on high forever.*

This really should be a new sentence.

 It is that most rare of all poetic forms in Hebrew poetry:
 a stand alone line.

 You find lots of couplets, and a pretty regular assortment of triplets,
 but the solo line is almost never used.

We saw last time that the central theme of Book IV of the Psalter
is the Kingship of the LORD.

And that theme is introduced right here – at the center of Psalm 92 –

with that most rare of poetic forms – the solo line.

But you, O LORD, are on high forever.

We are not a poetic generation.

We are more used to watching movies and listening to music.
But think about how a movie will gradually build up suspense
and then suddenly “boom” – there’s the grand climax!

This is that moment in this poem.

It’s entirely in keeping with the whole flow of the poem –
and yet the way that it is done is something of a shock!

One line.

One line that doesn’t fit the rhythms of the rest of the poem.

Because this one line disrupts everything else.

It is this one line that disrupts all the patterns and rhythms of the flesh.

“But you, O LORD, are on high forever.”

Because the LORD is on high,
therefore we know that evildoers are doomed to destruction.

3’ Because All Your Enemies Will Perish (v9)

And then the triplet in verse 9 explains the details of what we heard
in the triplet of verse 7:

*⁹ For behold, your enemies, O LORD,
for behold, your enemies shall perish;
all evildoers shall be scattered.*

The wicked may sprout like grass and all evildoers may flourish – for now.

But when you see the LORD enthroned on high forever,
you *know* that the evildoers cannot possibly flourish forever.

In this way, Psalm 92 is picking up on the themes of Psalm 73.

Psalm 73 had opened book three of the Psalter

with a song that lays bare the temptation to doubt God.

When the psalmist looks around at the triumph of the wicked,

he nearly succumbs to doubt –

he nearly betrays God’s people by giving up hope.

But then, when he goes into the sanctuary

he sees their end –

in the light of the glory of the LORD,
he sees that the wicked will not prosper forever.

Now, here in Book 4, Psalm 92 echoes those concerns.
And, like in Psalm 73, the solution is seen in the context of worship.
When we gather on the Sabbath day – morning and evening –
we see the true solution – we see the end of history.
Because when we gather in the temple –
when we gather in the presence of the Triune God –
we are reminded that *he* is on high forever.

And all evildoers shall be scattered.
But you don't have to wait until forever to see this!
Just look around you.
Sure, the wicked triumph *for a while* –
but their wickedness will eventually catch up to them.

My Academy students have been reading about the Greek and Persian wars.
Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, points out how pride goes before a fall.
How revenge invariably falls back upon itself.
How empires overextend themselves –
until they crumble from within (as well without).

An empire that is built on conquest will eventually provoke a reaction!
Exploitation will always destroy itself.
That's just as true today as it ever was!

When the powerful exploit the weak
eventually their day will come – the cries of the weak will be heard –
and God will overthrow the rich and powerful.

The fact that the rich and powerful sometimes die before they are caught
does not change the outcome.
In the end, God will bring justice.

And that end does *not necessarily* have to wait until the final judgment.
You can have confidence that the final judgment will rectify *all* wrongs –
but there is *some justice* in this life as well –
which is the point of verses 10-11:

2' But You Have Exalted Me and I Have Seen the Downfall of My Foes (v10-11)

¹⁰ *But you have exalted my horn like that of the wild ox;
you have poured over me^[a] fresh oil.*

¹¹ *My eyes have seen the downfall of my enemies;
my ears have heard the doom of my evil assailants.*

Who is speaking here?

“Exalting my horn” has to do with “exalting my power”
(the horns of an ox are the emblem of its power),
so when God exalts my horn, he is vindicating me and establishing me securely.
(After all, if you are a strong wild ox –
what are you afraid of?
A strong wild ox can fight off *anything!*)

But the second image is of anointing –
“you have poured over me fresh oil.”

In the context of Book 4, there is *no* Davidic King on the throne.
So there is a sense in which the singular voice remains unidentified –
but in light of God’s promises to David,
we know that David’s son would reign forever –
and so we must hear this as the voice of the Messiah –
as the voice of our Lord Jesus, the Christ –
He is the one whose horn has been exalted –
He is the one who has been anointed with oil.

And he is the one who has seen the downfall of his enemies –
who has heard the doom of his evil assailants.

The cross did not succeed at destroying the Righteous One!
The grave could not hold the Innocent Suffering Servant.
And God raised him from the dead –
because it was not possible for death to hold on to him!

And because of the exaltation of the *singular* anointed one,
the many will be blessed.

Notice that verses 12-15 turns to what happens to the *many*
because of the triumph and exaltation of the *one*.

Up until verses 12-15 the song has been all about *you* and *me* and the wicked.
But now we are introduced to the “them” –
the righteous who flourish and grow and bear fruit.
But there is only a *them* because there is first a *me*.

It is only because of what Jesus has done as the Anointed One –
as the Exalted One –
that we can now join him in his song of praise for God’s mighty deeds!

1’ And so the Righteous Flourish and Declare the Justice of the LORD (v12-15)

¹² *The righteous flourish like the palm tree
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.*
¹³ *They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.*
¹⁴ *They still bear fruit in old age;
they are ever full of sap and green,*
¹⁵ *to declare that the LORD is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.*

Psalm 92 ends – where it starts – in the temple.

At the beginning of the song we heard the music of the lute and harp and lyre –
the stringed instruments of the temple.

At the end of the song we see the house of the LORD – the courts of our God.

And in this temple there are many trees!

The palm tree and the cedar of Lebanon
are growing and flourishing in the house of the LORD.
Bearing fruit, full of sap, and green!

Solomon's temple had lots of cedar trees –

but none that were bearing fruit, full of sap, and green!

Solomon's temple used cedar *wood* –

but there were no living trees in Solomon's temple!

What is Psalm 92 doing?!

Well, Solomon's temple has been destroyed.

Maybe, by the time Book 4 was put together,
Zerubbabel's temple had been rebuilt.

But the Second Temple had no trees in the courtyard either!!

We use Hebrews 12 a lot as we remember that we have been gathered –
not at the earthly Mt. Sinai, but at the heavenly Mt. Zion.

Psalm 92 recognizes the basic principle of Hebrews 12.

Why did God tell Solomon to use cedars from Lebanon?

Because God's people *are* the cedars of Lebanon.

When we looked at the tabernacle last summer,

we saw that the tabernacle was designed from all the most glorious stuff of earth
in order to show how God's purpose in the tabernacle
was to foreshadow how God would come to dwell *in man*.

And so Psalm 92 portrays the courts of God – the house of the LORD –
as a forest – a fruitful orchard of palm and cedar.

In this way, Psalm 92 also draws on Psalm 1 –

“blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked...
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
For he is like a tree planted by streams of water,
that yields its fruit in season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does he prospers.”

Psalm 92 now sees that this vision of the Blessed Man
comes to its fruition through the blessing of the Exalted One –
the blessing of the Anointed One.

When Jesus is exalted – when Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father –
then truly, the righteous flourish like the palm tree.

And we declare that the LORD is upright –
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

Notice that in the last line, the singular voice comes back.
They – the righteous – all declare that the LORD is upright –
but only because “he is *my* rock.”
And last week, we saw that in Psalm 91, that *singular voice*
proclaimed the same message.

It is only because the Father heard the cry of his beloved Son
that we can have confidence that he will hear us when we cry!

Conclusion: A Song for the Sabbath

And so Psalm 92 is a fitting song for the Sabbath.
It is a fitting song to sing as we come to celebrate what Jesus did on the cross.
It is a part of why we have services every Sunday morning and evening.

Because we declare God’s steadfast love in the morning,
and his faithfulness at night.

What do you do on Sunday evenings?
We don’t require people to attend both services on Sunday.
But Psalm 92 clearly applies the principle of praising God
to both morning and evening prayer – particularly *on the Sabbath*.

Now I know that many of you don’t quite agree
with the whole “Christian Sabbath” idea that we teach – and that’s fine!

But if you believe that every day is alike –
 then you should be practicing morning and evening prayer *every day!*
And so you should definitely long to be with God's people morning and evening – every day!

I would love it if we could develop a pattern of morning and evening prayer every day!

I know that for myself, my failure to be devoted to daily morning and evening prayer
 is due to my laziness and my lack of devotion to my God.

So I'm not accusing you of anything beyond what I am accusing myself of!

 But our goal in our morning and evening worship on Sundays
 is to help us in our practice and pattern
 of being devoted to God daily.

By setting one whole day aside,
 we are reminded of how Christ has sanctified all days.

It's why we also encourage people to spend Sunday afternoons together.
If we are going to devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship,
 to the breaking of bread,
 and to the prayers,
 then we need to be involved in each other's lives.