

## Alive: Spirit of Restoration

### Psalm 98

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The war in Ukraine. Mass shootings. A pandemic that continues to take lives and undermine economies. Flooding, droughts, and famines. You don't need to watch more than two minutes of the nightly news to know that not all is well with this world in which we live. People without faith in God often point to these things as evidence that there is no God. How could there be a "good God" when there is so much pain and misery in the world?

But people of faith hold onto the hope that God will put all things right in the end. And the word in the Bible for putting all things right is "judgment". That probably sounds strange to modern ears because we tend to think about judgment in the context of a courtroom in which judgment usually means condemnation and punishment. However, in biblical times, good judges did far more than condemn or punish. They worked to set things right, to restore balance, harmony, and well-being. Their justice was restorative, not just punitive. As writer Brian McLaren puts it, *"The final goal of judgment was to curtail or convert all that was evil so that good would be free to run wild."*

Listen for that theme at the end of today's Scripture reading from Psalm 98:

Sing a new song to the LORD, for He has done wonderful deeds.

His right hand has won a mighty victory; His holy arm has shown his saving power!

The LORD has announced his victory and has revealed His righteousness to every nation!

He has remembered His promise to love and be faithful to Israel.

The ends of the earth have seen the victory of our God. Shout to the LORD, all the earth;

break out in praise and sing for joy!

Sing your praise to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and melodious song,

with trumpets and the sound of the ram's horn.

Make a joyful symphony before the LORD, the King!

Let the sea and everything in it shout his praise!

Let the earth and all living things join in.

Let the rivers clap their hands in glee!

Let the hills sing out their songs of joy

before the LORD, for he is coming to judge the earth. He will judge the world with justice, and the nations with fairness.

This is the word of God for the people of God.

Thanks be to God.

If God's judgment is nothing but punishment, then this Psalm makes no sense. After all the joy and exuberance of the Psalm, why would the Psalmist conclude with a word about God's judgment if judgment were bad news? But in fact, the culmination of the Psalmist's reasons for joyfully praising the Lord is that the Lord will judge. The Lord will restore all things. And that is good news indeed!

It's obvious to everyone that that kind of justice and restoration doesn't always happen in a satisfying way in this life. Even when justice is done, that doesn't mean that real restoration has happened. For instance, I've got a friend who is an attorney. He specializes in medical malpractice suits, which means he seeks justice for those who have been harmed by medical malpractice. So, imagine that a surgeon amputates the wrong leg. This attorney might win justice for the patient in the form of financial compensation, but no human being can restore what that patient has lost.

As followers of Jesus, we are a people who trust that God can and will set things right, that the long arc of human history is moving toward restoration. That's what "final judgment" means in the Christian tradition. When the Apostles' Creed declares that Jesus "will come to judge the living and the dead" we don't hear it as a threat, but as a promise. It doesn't mean that everything that can be punished will be punished, but that everything that can be restored will be restored. When the writer of Hebrews says, *"It is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that, the judgment,"* he isn't saying, "after this, the punishment". He's saying, "after this, the restoration."

I like to think about it this way. Maybe you've worked in a place where the annual performance review is cause for fear and trembling. It's that time when the boss tells you everything you've done wrong in the past year and how you need to be better. It's a moment of judgment in the sense of punishment. But in a healthy company, performance issues are handled incrementally throughout the year so that the annual performance review is a time

to celebrate the good work that's been done and talk about we can make it even better in the year to come. From that perspective, the annual performance review is something to look forward to.

In the same way, final judgment isn't cause for fear and trembling. It's cause for hope and celebration. Now, does that mean that there will be no cost, no regret or mourning at the final judgment? No. That's where the biblical image of fire comes in. So often preachers have used the image of fire as a means of torture and punishment. The bad people burn forever! But in the Bible fire is most often understood as a means of cleansing and purifying. Gold and silver are put under intense heat, not to destroy them but to remove any impurities. And so, we trust that in the final judgment, we will be purified and our flaws and failures will be burned away. And I suspect that we'll experience that as loss, regret, and remorse. But its purpose is not to punish us, but to purify us, to restore us, to be fully all that God created us to be.

I've been talking about final judgment as something we hope for, something that happens after we die, but that doesn't mean that it doesn't impact the way that we live now. Here are just a few of the ways in which our trust in God's restoration impacts daily life.

First, if God is ultimately about restoration, so are we. We invest the resources of our time and money into seeking justice and restoration for those who need it in the world. This vision of God's restoration compels us to greater stewardship because we want our lives to increasingly reflect the heart of God for the world. This is one of the biggest reasons I love supporting this ministry financially. From our Mission Outpost to our POP for Justice ministry to our Love Your Neighbor initiative, Prince of Peace is a community that takes seriously the call to participate in God's work of restoration in the world. We don't just pay lip service to that call; we change people's lives.

Second, it changes the way we see trials and difficulties in daily life. Instead of wondering if God is somehow punishing us for something we did wrong, we begin to see life's challenges as the refining fire that tempers and purifies us. Delay becomes the fire that burns away impatience. Annoyances are like flames that burn away our selfishness. The demands

of duty are like degrees of heat that burn away our laziness. The unkind words and deeds of others are like a furnace in which our character is more deeply formed until we learn to bless, not curse, in response. Whatever we face, whether ease or struggle, life or death, St. Paul's encouragement is the same, "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

And finally, trusting in God's final restoration keeps us living in hope. While we cannot see the way to healing all that is broken in this world, God can. And while we commit our lives to bringing as much restoration to people as we can in this life, we trust that God will do what we cannot. And so, we never lose hope. I love the way St. Paul puts it in his second letter to the Corinthians,

*That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our spirits are being renewed every day. For our present troubles are small and won't last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So, we don't look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.* Until that day when God restores all things, the Spirit leads us along in that long arc toward restoration and healing. Like a mother in childbirth, groaning with pain and anticipation, the Spirit groans within us. She will not rest until all is made whole, and all is made well.

And it isn't just the world that God will judge and make whole. It's you and it's me. We are, all of us, painfully aware of how far short we fall of our own expectations of what we could be, let alone God's hopes and dreams for us. It's so easy to get discouraged and bear the weight of self-condemnation, which only serves to compel us to judge and condemn others. But the Good News that we live into today is that God does not condemn us. God loves us and patiently nudges us toward wholeness which opens our hearts to love ourselves and our neighbor, despite our faults and failures.

Life will not be easy. We will never be alone. In the end all will be well. That is all that we're promised. It is all that we know, and all that we need to know.