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Psalm 92
A Psalm. A Song for the Sabbath.
(Revised Common Lectionary) (RSV)

Introduction to Psalm 92

There is an old Jewish Rabbinic tradition which holds that this Psalm was composed by Adam on the first Sabbath of creation. It is a lovely thought to think that Everyman (for that is what the name Adam symbolizes), including now also every woman, experiences the goodness and the joy of giving thanks daily to Yahweh for his steadfast love and faithfulness morning and evening.

There is no clue from the Psalm itself as to where or when or by whom it might have been written. According to the Mishnah (the collection of Jewish Rabbinic traditions to about 200 A.D.) this Psalm was sung on the Sabbath by the Levites in the Temple. Psalm 92 opens as a hymn of thanksgiving and of praise (verses 1-4), and continues with a theme familiar from other Psalms (e.g., Psalm 1 and Psalm 119), namely, that the righteous shall flourish (verse 12), and that the wicked, though they flourish for a little while, are in the end doomed (verse 7).

Vv. 1-4

- ¹ It is good to give thanks to the LORD,
to sing praises to thy name, O Most High;**
- ² to declare thy steadfast love in the morning,
and thy faithfulness by night,**
- ³ to the music of the lute and the harp,
to the melody of the lyre.**
- ⁴ For thou, O LORD, hast made me glad by thy work;
at the works of thy hands I sing for joy.**

God gave the Sabbath not only as a day of rest, but also as a day for reflecting upon his goodness and mercy. Such reflection and meditation is to lead us to give thanks, to sing praises, and to declare the steadfast love and faithfulness of the LORD, the Name of the Most High, the One God above all other gods. Such activity may properly be day-long, from evening to evening.

The Psalm offers no particular clue as to what specific work of God is intended for our praise. We should therefore regard it as a blank on which we may write that goodness of God which we have experienced, and which deserves our thanksgiving. Several types of goodness come to mind. The ancient Jewish legend that Adam wrote this Psalm suggests to us that we may appropriately thank God for all the blessings of creation. God has made me and all creatures and has given us all that we need to sustain this body and life; for this it is our duty and delight to thank and praise him, serve and obey him. There is the goodness God showed Israel when he led them out of the slavery of Egypt into the freedom of the children of God (Exodus 19:4), in remembrance of the promise he had made to Abraham. This goodness finds its fuller outpouring in that work of God in Christ by which he called us out of darkness into his

marvelous light (1 Peter 2:9). And there is that goodness of God by which he molds us into the image of his dear Son, tearing away from us all that is old and transient, all that is sinful and mortal, to make room for all that is new and lasting, all that is righteous and eternal.

Vv. 5-9

- ⁵ How great are thy works, O LORD!
Thy thoughts** (designs, intentions) **are very deep!**
- ⁶ The dull man** (the dullard) **cannot know,
the stupid cannot understand this:**
- ⁷ that, though the wicked sprout like grass
and all evildoers flourish,
they are doomed to destruction for ever;**
- ⁸ but thou, O LORD, art on high for ever.**
- ⁹ For, lo, thine enemies, O LORD,
for, lo, thine enemies shall perish;
all evildoers shall be scattered.**

With verse 5 a new thought is introduced; how deep are the works of God! They can show us, if we are not dull and stupid, that human life cannot be lived in opposition to God, for all such evil doers will be destroyed. The Psalmist is realist enough to know that the wicked, those who despise and reject Yahweh, do indeed at times flourish. And the righteous often will have more than their share of suffering. There is no immediately perceptible correlation between worshipping the LORD and temporal prosperity or, vice-versa, between blasphemy and earthly misfortune. But the evildoers cannot flourish forever, because Yahweh, our God on High, finally makes an end of His enemies so that He alone will reign.

It is always a strong temptation to imagine that our illnesses are the sign of God's indifference to our plight, or that God loves us less than others who remain well, or that there is a fatal defect in our faith. And the temptation grows in severity as illness becomes prolonged in time. Oh God, why me? Why now? Why so long? The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ does not remove suffering from his own, but rather he suffers with us, so that we may triumph with him. He lengthens not only our suffering but also our view, so that we may see beyond the misery of our cross to the blessing of his Cross and Resurrection

Vv. 10-11

- ¹⁰ But thou hast exalted my horn like that of the wild ox;
thou hast poured over me fresh oil.**
- ¹¹ Mine eyes have seen the downfall of mine enemies,
mine ears have heard the doom of mine evil assailants.**

The wild ox is a symbol of great strength; to lift up, or to exalt, the horn is an image for displaying one's strength. Thus the Psalmist praises the LORD for clearly manifesting to others that in Him, he (the Psalmist) is given final strength, power, and victory. Our calling to declare

the wonderful works of God is not suspended when adversity strikes, but in tribulation it comes into its own. To praise God in health is easy and correspondingly common; to praise God in sickness reveals a strong faith in the God whose power is made known in weakness and is correspondingly the more precious.

To pour fresh oil over someone conveys no sense to us, unless we understand the ancient Biblical ceremony of anointing. It is a ceremony to install someone into office, like a king or a priest or even a prophet. It was also used to declare a winner in a contest. The latter is what is most probably intended in verse 10b, especially in view of verse 11 and following, where the Psalmist stands triumphant vis-à-vis his enemies. But it is clear also from verse 11 that the downfall of the enemies is the work of God's hand; the Psalmist does not effect that downfall, he hears about it. And when his ears hear of the Good News of God's triumph on behalf of His People, he entrusts himself into the hands of that Powerful Mercy. Of such a faithful response, Genesis 15:6 states that it is accounted to the believer as righteousness.

Vv. 12-15

**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 bring forth fruit in old age,
they are ever full of sap and green,**

**¹⁵ to show that the LORD is upright;
he is my rock (protector), and there is no unrighteousness in him.**

A mark of the righteous is that they are planted like trees in the house of the LORD, the Temple, and flourish in the courts of our God. Planted in the house of the LORD among the throng of other worshippers of the Name of the LORD, they bear their fruit all the days of their lives (verse 14). The name of that fruit is faith in God, love for neighbors, and – this is especially notable among the elder Christians – patient endurance under trials.

To unfold what it is like to confess the God of Abraham and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to be our Righteous Rock under trial, I call to your attention the following hymn from The Lutheran Hymnal, #427. It is based on the text of Isaiah 43:1-7.

1. How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!
What more can He say than to you He hath said Who unto their Savior for refuge have fled?
2. In every condition, -- in sickness, in health, In poverty's vale, or abounding in wealth,
At home and abroad, on the land, on the sea, -- The Lord, the Almighty, thy strength e'er shall be.
3. "Fear not, I am with thee, oh, be not dismayed; For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;
I'll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.
4. "When through the deep waters I call thee to go, The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow;
For I will be with thee thy troubles to bless And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

5. “When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply.
The flames shall not hurt thee, I only design Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.
6. “E’en down to old age all My people shall prove My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;
And when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn, Like lambs they shall still in My bosom be borne.
7. “The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose I will not, I will not, desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I’ll never, no never, not ever, forsake!”

The Prayer from the LBW to accompany Psalm 92:

Lord, take our shame away and make us rejoice in your saving acts, that all who have been redeemed by your Son may always abound in works of faith, hope, and love in your service, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Guide to Reflection:

1. Verse 4 is an invitation consciously to rehearse the LORD's goodness to us.
2. The new element in this Psalm is the accent on attendance at the public worship; that is one of the marks of the righteous person. When we Christians worship, there is continual reinforcement of our righteousness as an alien righteousness; that is, we may dare to call ourselves righteous only because God has made us His own in Christ and therefore declares us righteous, and because in Christ God reveals to us how righteous we shall yet have to become under the gentle pressure of His Holy Spirit (recall Psalm 31:1c). That is the only antidote to that subtlest form of wickedness, self-righteousness. Such wickedness will prosper and flourish for a while, but it is illusory and therefore temporary. The only long-term prosperity is that which come from the hand of the God Most High, the merciful LORD, the forgiving Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and His Spirit.

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