

Psalm 75 – How Do I Pray This?

I came to Psalm 75 as part of my daily devotional reading, in sequence, with the book open on the table.

The heading says two things about it. *A Psalm of Asaph. A Song.* One word means something played, the other means something sung. So it has been prayed and it has been sung, by people who knew how.

I tried to pray it. I got as far as the first verse – *we give thanks to you, O God; we give thanks, for your name is near* – and then the psalm stopped talking to God and started talking about him. God speaks for four verses. Then somebody explains what God has just said. Then a singer says he will sing. Then horns are cut off and horns are lifted up. By the end I had read ten verses and prayed one.

There is nothing in it to ask for. No *how long*, no *arise*, no *hear me*. Psalm 74, three pages back and by the same man, is nothing but asking. This one has the answer already given and no gap left where I stand.

Then I tried to sing it. I could not find the tune, and I do not mean the melody.

I know what to do with Psalm 23. I have prayed it beside beds where the person in the bed could no longer say it, and where everyone in the room knew how the week would end. You do not have to explain that psalm to anybody. *I shall not want. He leads me. I will fear no evil.* It has a first person with a need in it, and the need is the one thing in the room nobody has to be told about.

That is what I mean by finding the tune. Not the melody – the occasion. Psalm 23 has an address. I know where I am standing when I reach for it.

Psalm 75 has an address too. I did not know it, and I had read the psalm often.

There is a small vinyl-covered book of Psalms I have been using for a long time. On the inside cover, in my own hand, there is this.

MY PRAYER

Lord, I've been using this little book for some time now, but today, 2/6/16, I pray (hope) that it will become one of my most treasured possessions.

That in its pages I might find both comfort and correction.

May it become so well used that its pages have become illegible because of the jottings that inscribe every page and the tears that impregnate the paper on which they are written.

May the book be a doorway into the throne of God's grace and a gateway into the courts of praise.

May this prayer be answered.

Then I said, "Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart." – Psalm 40:7-8

Write these words on my heart...

In the margin beside it are dates. 1/6/17. 11/3/19. 3/6/19. 22/10/20. And 18/8/26, which I put there this week. There are other times I have prayed it and not stopped to make the note.

Comfort and correction. I asked for both, ten years ago, and I have had a great deal of the first. Psalm 23 is comfort, and I know what to do with it.

I did not know what to do with Psalm 75.

So I looked at the words.

Horn – qeren – comes four times in ten verses. God says to the wicked, do not lift up your horn, and then says it again – do not lift up your horn on high. Then at the end, all the horns of the wicked I will cut off, but the horns of the righteous shall be lifted up.

I read that and I see nothing. Or worse, I see the wrong things, because I have a lifetime of pictures attached to the word and none of them are in the psalm. A trumpet. A hunting horn. Something on a Viking helmet. The horns of the altar, which are in the Bible and are a different thing again, and the ten horns of Revelation, which are a different thing a third time. Songs work by pictures. When the picture is wrong, or when there are four of them, the message garbles.

The obvious fix is to translate it. The psalm pairs the horn with a neck – *do not lift up your horn on high, or speak with haughty neck* – so the gesture is plainly something a man does with his head. Put *head* in and the verse comes clear at once. *Don't lift your head up like that. Don't stick your neck out and talk that way.*

That is what I did. And it worked, and it was wrong.

Then I asked whether a Hebrew boy of twelve would have needed that translated.

He would not. He had seen it. He had watched a ram come up the road with its head back and its horns riding high, owning the ground it walked on, and he had seen a beaten one go past with its head down. *Horn* is not a puzzle to him. It is the most concrete word in the verse. He does not need it turned into *head*, because the horn already is the head, lifted.

He had seen the altar too, probably more than once, with a horn at each of its four corners. So when he hears *the horns of the wicked I will cut off*, he has two pictures at once and no trouble holding both, because they say the same thing. Horns are what a thing has when it cannot be shifted. Cut them off and the animal is meat and the altar is a table.

He knew the third one as well, the ram's horn they blew to gather people and to start a year. One word, three sights, and not one of them a metaphor to him.

What I had done was recast the picture. I put a man's head where the ram's head was, and the verse came clear – but it was now a picture of a man being told off, and the psalm is a paddock.

The psalm gives its own word for the gesture, in the same breath. *I say to the boastful, "Do not boast," and to the wicked, "Do not lift up your horn."* Boasting is the lifted horn in our language. A ram with his head back is a man who cannot stop telling you.

So the obscurity was never in the Hebrew. The Hebrew is a boy watching a ram come up the road. The obscurity is ours. We do not live with animals, and none of us has ever seen the altar.

So I had the picture back. I read the psalm again with the ram in it, and it made sense from end to end. Loud men with their heads up. God saying put it down. God saying at the finish that he will cut the horns off the ones who lifted their own and lift the horns of the ones who did not.

And I still could not pray it.

That was the part I had not expected. I had assumed the trouble was that I did not understand the psalm. It was not. I understood it now. I read it through twice and there was nothing left in it I could not follow.

So there were two things wrong, not one. The first was that I could not see it. That is fixed by looking up a word. The second was that I did not know what to do with it. Looking up a word does nothing for that at all.

I could have stopped there and been satisfied. A word looked up, a picture recovered, the verses clear. It reads like progress. But a psalm you can explain and cannot pray is a psalm you have finished with.

So I counted who was talking.

Verse 1 is addressed to God. *We give thanks to you.* That is the only verse in the psalm that is.

Verses 2 to 5 are God talking. *At the set time that I appoint I will judge with equity.* Four verses of it, straight through, ending with the warning about the horn.

Verses 6 and 7 are somebody else, explaining what has just been said, and speaking about God rather than to him. *It is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another.* Then verse 8 turns back to God's own voice – there is a cup in his hand.

Verse 9 is a single voice answering. *I will declare it forever; I will sing praises to the God of Jacob.*

Verse 10 goes back to cutting and lifting horns.

One verse out of ten spoken to God, and it is not a request. I had been reading the psalm as though it were one man's prayer, the way Psalm 23 is, and it is not one man's anything. It is at least two voices and they do not blend. I had been trying to sing both parts at once.

There is an old word for this. An antiphon is a line sung by one voice and answered by another – voice against voice, not blended. Psalm 136 is the plain case: a leader sings the line, everyone answers *for his steadfast love endures forever*. Ezra says the builders sang responsively when the foundation was laid, and Nehemiah has two choirs walking the wall in opposite directions until they meet.¹

It is not a monastery thing borrowed later. It is how these were sung.

So I set Psalm 75 out in its parts, in the plainest words I could find.

THE PEOPLE	<i>Thank you, God. Thank you.</i> You are close, and we know what you have done.
GOD	I have set a day. I chose it. When it comes I will judge, and I will get it right.
THE PEOPLE	<i>Thank you, God. Thank you.</i>
GOD	The ground shakes. Everyone standing on it shakes. I am the one holding it steady. I always have been.
THE PEOPLE	<i>Thank you, God. Thank you.</i>
GOD	To the loud ones: stop. To the ones doing wrong: get your horns down. Don't put your head back like that. Don't stretch your neck out and talk that way.
THE PEOPLE	Nobody is lifted up from the east. Nobody from the west. Nobody from the desert. You are the judge. You put one down and you lift another up.
GOD	There is a cup in my hand and it is full. Every one of them will drink it. All of it.
THE PEOPLE	We will keep saying it. We will keep singing it. God of Jacob, we will sing.
GOD	Every horn that lifted itself, I will cut off. Every horn that did not, I will lift.

The refrain is mine, not Asaph's. The psalm says it once, at the start. I have put it back in three times because that is what the people's part does, and because saying it once did not get it into me.

Read down the left-hand column and the question answers itself.

I cannot say God's lines. I cannot set the day. The ground is wobbling and I am not the one holding it steady. I have no standing to tell a boastful man to be quiet, and I am not the one who decides what happens to him.

And the cutting is God's. That is the line I had to give up, and it took some doing. My own pride is the last thing I would ever think to cut.

Which leaves the lines marked *the people*, and there are only two things in them. The first is the plain statement that nobody is lifted from any direction and God is the one who lifts. The second is thank you, and we will keep singing.

That is my part. All of it.

Not unclear. Small.

Which is when I found out.

You reach for Psalm 75 when somebody else's head is up and yours is down. When the position went to another man. When the thing you built was handed to someone who did not build it.

More than once I have sat down to write my resignation letter. Frustrations at work precipitated it, and other things, but underneath was the feeling that it was all unfair. Nobody recognised what I was doing. Other people got the recognition and the promotion, and I kept doing their work. And the problem was that I had nobody to turn to and nothing I could do – except resign.

I only ever handed one of them in. Writing them was the only thing I could do.

Psalm 75 does not comfort a man writing that letter. It takes things off him.

It takes the compass first. *Not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up* – and the verb is the same one as the horn: lifted high. It means promotion. Nobody out there can promote you. Not the panel. Not the man who might have put in a word. Not the organisation that looked past me. Three directions, and that is the whole map. And it cuts the other way too: if no direction can promote a man, then the man who was promoted did not get it from out there either. There is nothing to resent, because there is nobody who did it.

Then it takes the verdict, because God is the judge and not him. Then the cup. Then the axe.

I have been reading the Psalms a long time, and this one has been in the book the whole while. There were years when I needed it and did not know it was there. Not because it was hidden, and not because the Hebrew was hard. I had read it often enough. I did not know what it was for, so I read it and turned the page.

The psalm was there for all of it.

And it hands back one line.

NORMAN

Thank you, God. Thank you.

1 Ezra 3:11; Nehemiah 12:31-43.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this article, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.