

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message Keep On Trusting, No Matter What

Scripture Psalm 10

Today we will be thinking about Psalm 10. We don't know who wrote this Psalm, but the assumption is that the author was David. There are other mysteries and controversies associated with Psalm 10, so I will begin with a brief history lesson.

For more than 2300 years, translators and commentators have debated whether Psalms 9 and 10 should be linked together or not. When the Old Testament was translated into the Greek language about 300 BC, the Hebrew translators combined the two Psalms into one. The result is that the Septuagint version of the Bible has a different numbering system than our Bibles.

[Gratuitous information: The translators had some good, but not necessarily compelling, reasons for what they did. They noted that there was no superscription or identifying description at the beginning of Psalm 10. They also noted that the subject material and the patterns of the verses were similar enough that Psalm 10 could be a continuation of Psalm 9.]

There was one more important reason why the two Psalms could be connected: there is a sort of acrostic structure which runs through both Psalms. In the Old Testament an acrostic structure was a poetic device whereby the first letter of each verse or pair of verses followed the order of the Hebrew alphabet. Verse 1 would begin with "Aleph," verse 2 with "Beth," verse 3 with "Gimel," and so on. However, in the case of these two Psalms, the acrostic pattern is broken and incomplete. As I said, scholars have debated the connections' issue for a long time without coming to definitive conclusions.]

The Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible completed about 400 AD, followed the Septuagint and, as a result, the numbers of the Psalms are different in Catholic Bibles. Most Bible versions used by Protestants separate the Psalms but have footnotes explaining the controversy. That's the history lesson for today.

Next we turn to philosophy. Psalm 10 is important because of the two really big questions asked in verse 1: Where is God when bad things happen to good people? and Why doesn't God, if He is omnipotent and omniscient and opposed to evil, act decisively when bad people do such terrible things? These are questions which have been discussed throughout human history. These questions appear in other Psalms. They are the unanswered questions in the book of Job. And they are especially important questions in our time.

These questions have been called the "Achilles' heel" of the Christian faith. Philosophers who are antagonistic to God argue that the existence of evil demonstrates that God is either not omnipotent or not good and loving. They reason that if evil exists apart from the sovereign power of God, then God cannot be omnipotent. On the other hand, if God does have the power to prevent evil but fails to do so, then this would reflect upon His character, indicating that He is not good and loving.

Because of the significance of this problem, Christian theologians through the centuries have attempted to explain the relationship between a just God and the existence of evil. The technical term for this subject is "theodicy." No one has yet come up with completely satisfying answers to these "why" questions. In the final analysis, believers must trust themselves to God. They can only assume that God is both all-powerful and completely good, and that, for some reason, known only to Himself, He has allowed a place in creation for the existence of evil. That's the underlying theme of Psalm 10.

We all recognize that the forces of evil are extraordinary and cause great pain and suffering in the world. Believers understand from Scripture that God is sovereign over evil and, while we don't know the reasons God tolerates evil in this present age, we know that He will not allow evil to have the last word — that He will some day eliminate from His universe all evil. We must focus our assurance and our hopes on that future redemption and, in the meantime, go on trusting God in spite of our difficulties and questions.

All of us, at times, ask "why?" questions. "Why, God, did this happen to me or a loved one?" "Why must I suffer?" "Why am I the victim of exploitation, bullying, prejudice?" "Why, God, don't you answer my prayers?" Many of God's people today are experiencing the same kinds of conflicts as the victims in Psalm 10, and it often seems that God is indifferent to their desperate circumstances and refuses to come to their aid.

Psalm 10 is the model we must follow while living in this fallen world. Like the writer in the first part of the Psalm we have the privilege and freedom to complain about the cruelty, violence, and other kinds of injustice which are in the culture and society around us. And like the writer, we must earnestly beseech God to take action to remedy the situation. We have the freedom, as members of God's family, to ask Him to do something about the injustice around us, asking Him to "call wicked people to account;" to ask that His "will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Like the writer, we must maintain our confidence that the LORD is sovereign and righteous, and that He can be trusted to make conditions right and proper. Our "why?" questions may remain unanswered, but our confidence in the LORD must remain strong.

As we read the verses, you will notice that the mood of the Psalm changes from perplexity to boldness in prayer to confidence and anticipation of the LORD's deliverance. The Psalmist kept on trusting in spite of the circumstances.

Read Psalm 10

The writer knows that only the LORD can bring about change in earthly circumstances, and He is frustrated about the LORD's lack of obvious involvement. The writer does not directly accuse the LORD of forsaking His people, but, from his viewpoint, it seemed that the LORD was keeping His distance, even hiding Himself so as to not be involved in the injustices which were occurring on every hand.

Verses 2 through 11 give us a timeless description of arrogant, unscrupulous, and greedy evildoers. There are only a few other such thorough descriptions in Scripture. The most familiar of these passages is in Romans chapter 1 where the Apostle Paul wrote: "the wrath of God is being revealed ... against the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness." Paul stated that these men "knew God, but neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened," and "since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, ... they became filled with every kind of wickedness, evil greed and depravity, ... Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (*Romans 1:18-32 excerpts*).

Those words of Paul are an apt description of hard-core evildoers. Such people know what God thinks about their behavior, but they choose to ignore the truth. Several similar reasons are given in the Psalm for their behavior: Evildoers are “arrogant” (verse 2); they put their desires, “the cravings of their hearts,” ahead of their knowledge of right and wrong (verse 3); they “revile the LORD” (verse 3) and make no room for Him in their thoughts (verse 4). They are “haughty” and consider themselves above the ways of God and their fellow humans (verse 5).

The wicked people in verses 2 through 11 had a total disregard for the LORD and His covenant commandments. They were not atheists; they were simply and deliberately choosing to live without God. They had exchanged obedience to God for a self-indulgent lifestyle. They had exchanged the worship of their God for the self-exaltation of themselves. They were creatures who thought of themselves as higher than their Creator. The Psalmist could not understand why God did not rise up to defend His name and honor.

The Psalm implies that these wicked people were members of the covenant community of Israel, hence were oppressing their fellow countrymen. From their positions of political and economic power, they were taking advantage of others. This made their behavior all the more despicable. In recognizing this, the Psalmist was even more perplexed about the LORD’s tolerance of the situation.

The mouths of the wicked were “full of curses and lies and threats.” These words are synonyms for intimidation and false accusations. Such harsh words were intended to instill fear in those who were identified as helpless and innocent. The second line in verse 7 indicates the impact of the words; the result was “trouble and evil” for victims.

Verses 8, 9, and 10 graphically picture the behavior of evildoers. They were like wild animals lying in wait to ambush and gain control of what they want. After the wicked person had his victim, he carried him off like a lion. In the picturesque poetry of the Psalm, the victims were overpowered by brute force. There was no justice or mercy extended to them. The mighty ones were successful in having their way. The Psalmist was disheartened. He knew that he was powerless to change what was happening around him.

Verse 11 sums up the arrogance of the evildoers. They were bold and vain in their thinking. They believed they would always succeed in their activities. The fact that God had not yet hindered their activities had convinced them that “God had either forgotten” what was going on or “he had never seen what was happening.” To them God wasn’t a relevant influence in their lives.

Dismayed about what he was observing, the writer did what every believer must do in times of trouble and need; he turned to prayer. When circumstances are beyond our abilities and we don’t understand the ways of God, prayer should be our top priority. Notice the nature of the prayer in this Psalm. It was both a call for vindication of the victims and an appeal to God’s honor and reputation.

In verses 12 and 15 there is a request that the LORD will manifest His authority and strength: “Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand,” and “Break the arm of the wicked and evil man.” In other words, “Take control. Show Your strength. Take away the abilities of those who are wicked and evil.” The writer wanted God to demonstrate in a visible way who really had ultimate authority. The evildoers had become powerful and autocratic. They had their way with the general public. The average person had no ability to defend himself, let alone change the circumstances. Only God had that ability, and so the writer pleaded for God to stir Himself and render judgment.

In verses 13 and 14 the Psalmist appealed to God’s honor and reputation. The gist of his questions was, “LORD, how can You allow wicked people to revile Your holy righteous name? Why do you permit evildoers to imagine that You won’t call them to account for their actions?”

The writer believed deep in his inner being that God was not indifferent and uncaring. The writer drew from his understanding of the nature of God the answers to his own questions, saying, in essence, “I know that You, being God, do see what is going on and will take appropriate action. I know that You are committed to helping the casualties of evil.” These affirming statements revealed the faith of the writer, a faith that enabled him to see beyond the visible chaotic conditions that were a part of his daily life. The writer did not understand God’s purpose and timing, but he had a deep-seated confidence in the character of God.

In the closing section of the Psalm, verses 16 through 18, this faith vision of the Psalmist was projected to an even higher level. He lifted his eyes from his local earthly concerns to the universal level. The writer understood that the LORD is sovereign over everything; that the rule of God extends for ever and ever. The writer affirmed that the LORD was as aware of the attitudes and actions of the nations as He was the attitudes and actions of individuals. He affirmed that the judgments of the LORD would include not only the evildoers in the land of Israel but also all the nations that did not acknowledge Him.

God's land included Canaan, but in a larger sense the whole earth is His land since He is the King of all creation. In view of who God is, the writer was confident that there would be judgment of all evildoers, if not immediately, then eventually.

The writer affirmed his belief that the LORD “hears the desires of the afflicted,” and also encourages those who are afflicted during their hours of need, during those times in which they cry out to Him. He had a promise of God to give him confidence about this. Verse 18 informs us that the LORD “defends the fatherless and the oppressed.” This phrase is a reference to orphaned children and widows, the people who were most easily wronged and abused by evildoers.

Very early in Israel's history, when God was explaining the implications of the Ten Commandments, God had said, “Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry and my anger will be aroused” (*Exodus 22:22-23*). That command was repeated numerous times in Scripture and was known by the writer, and so the writer was confident that the LORD would fulfill His promise.

Verses 16 through 18 give us the ultimate reason the LORD will take action against evildoers. It is to differentiate those who are of the earth from those who are identified with heaven. Those who are afflicted, who are the fatherless and oppressed, those who call out to the LORD for relief from evildoers, they are the ones the LORD listens to and defends and accepts as His own. They are the individuals who will be vindicated by the LORD.

What is the lesson of this Psalm for us? First of all, we must accept that the questions of verse 1 are not answered, either in this Psalm or elsewhere in Scripture. We are not told why the LORD seems to stand far off in times of trouble. What the writer has affirmed for us is that God sees and understands what is happening and He will, in His own way and in His own time, avenge those who are weak, helpless, and abused when they call on Him. We have learned that there is a distinction between those who ignore and revile the LORD and those who call out to Him in their desperation.

We have learned that we must keep on trusting God even though it seems that He is not close. God's delay in executing justice may frustrate us. It may seem that our suffering and troubles go on and on without respite, without any answers to our prayers for relief. However, we can live with this frustration if we believe that God is powerful, sovereign, and just. And because Yahweh, the LORD, is the sovereign, ultimate authority in the universe, we can confidently entrust our circumstances and hope in Him. A confident faith in Him will enable us to manage our thoughts and attitudes.

A verse that should give us confidence is from Hebrews: He (God) Himself has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we may say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (*Hebrews 13:5-6*).