

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message An Appeal for God to Judge the Earth

Scripture Psalm 94

Let me remind you briefly of our discoveries in this series of Psalms. We discovered that Psalm 90 was a prayer asking God to exercise His sovereign powers to raise His people from their difficult circumstances. Psalm 91 was a statement of confidence in the faithfulness of God to protect His people and to keep them secure in the midst of dangers and disasters. Psalm 92 expressed the praise and thanksgiving of God's people for the works of the LORD, works which included both their blessings of prosperity and the destruction of evildoers. Psalm 93 was an acknowledgement of the sovereign majesty and power of the LORD over all His creation.

We are learning that there are obvious connections in the content of these Psalms. These connections will continue through Psalm 100, where we will bring this series to its conclusion. We will discover that there is a "flow," a progressive development, an emerging emphasis, in these connections as we proceed from one Psalm to the next.

The original readers of these Psalms could not possibly have recognized the links which exist between them as they recited them in the synagogues, for no other reason than that these Psalms were composed at different times by different people. However, the connections and flow of these Psalms point us, as modern day believers who sincerely seek to discover meaning and relevance in our Bible readings, toward a significant topic, the end of this age, when the LORD Jesus will return to earth to terminate earthly kingdoms and to establish His kingdom on earth. It is my opinion that this series of Psalms that we are focusing on have an eschatological emphasis.

One of the unique characteristics of Scripture is that its writings often have both a near and a far view. For example, the Old Testament prophets were often involved in situations which were affecting Israel, but which centuries later had other broader applications.

Consider when Isaiah tried to bolster the faith of King Ahaz of Judah, he announced that the Lord would give a sign that foreign enemies would not invade Judah: there would be the “birth of a son who would be called Immanuel.” The birth would be proof that God was with His people and protecting them. Within two years, this son was born and the enemy forces were gone (*Isaiah 7 and 8*). Then seven centuries later, that sign of the birth of a child was applied to Jesus, our Immanuel.

Consider when Daniel predicted an evil ruthless king who would exalt himself and speak unheard-of things against the God of gods and oppress the people of God. The near term fulfillment was in 169 BC when a Syrian king vented his anger on the people of Jerusalem. In this case the long term fulfillment has not happened yet, but it will at the end of the age when a world-wide ruler will be vain enough to fight against God and His people. Whenever we read prophecy, we need to consider the possibility of both near and far applications.

Sometimes interpretation is difficult. One particular difficulty when interpreting the Psalms is understanding the poetic metaphorical language. The Psalms are poetry. They were written to be sung. In the message last week, I explained that the references to the seas and their pounding waves were a metaphor for rebellious mankind. Some people, however, think the reference is to the power of literal pounding waves on the coastlines, and it is, of course, true that the LORD is “mightier than the thunder of the great waters,” which is the point made by the poet writer.

In our Bible study efforts, we should always try to figure out how the words will help us, encourage us, edify us. It is my opinion that the group of Psalms we are studying can help us to understand an important aspect of the Kingdom of God, and that these Psalms are specifically intended to encourage us about the future.

Now that you know where I am coming from, and where I’m going, let’s read Psalm 94. As we read, think about the judgment of God which will occur at the end of the age.

Read Psalm 94

This Psalm has a very organized structure. The first three verses are the introduction after which there are five stanzas of four verses each. That's the way the text is printed in most study Bibles.

The first three verses explain the theme of the Psalm. People who are suffering injustice at the hands of proud wicked people are pleading to God for a change in their circumstances. Specifically, they ask that God will “shine forth” and “rise up.” In other words, they want Him to reveal Himself in a discernible way, to appear in His royal splendor and show His power in order to “pay back to the proud what they deserve.”

In the Old Testament, God revealed His power many times in many different ways. One of the most dramatic episodes was when He rescued the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt. However, He did not at that time reveal Himself in any visible glorious way. He did appear among the rescued people of Israel during their years in the wilderness in the pillar of fire at night and in the cloud which protected and shielded the people by day, but these were representations of the presence of God, not the full revelation of His glorious splendor and majesty.

In the beginning of the New Testament era, God revealed Himself through the incarnation of Jesus. That was an incredible example of the glory of God, but, again, the full shining splendor of God's glory was not revealed even at that time.

According to Scripture, the time when the LORD God will “rise up” and “shine forth” and judge the wicked will occur at the second coming of Jesus. Jesus announced to His disciples that His coming would be like “lightning,” visible to everyone on earth, and that He would come “on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory” (*Matthew 24:27, 30*). The Apostle Paul instructed us to live “upright and godly lives in this present age while we wait for ... the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (*Titus 2:12-13*). I think you can recognize that the words “rise up” and “shine forth” have eschatological future implications in this Psalm.

The last two verses of the Psalm indicate that the future is not in doubt. The writer knows that the sovereign LORD is in control of human activities. He knows that he personally is safe in the fortress of the LORD where he has taken refuge, and he also knows that the LORD will some day “repay evildoers for their sins and destroy them for their wickedness.”

The writer's only concern is when this judgment will occur. "How long," he asks in verse 3, will the wicked continue their ways? "How long" will existing conditions on earth prevail? The writer is asking the same sort of questions that many believers today are asking. When will evil on this earth be brought to an end? When will the LORD, "the Judge of the earth," appear in His glory to "repay the wicked for their sins?"

In the first stanza, in verses 4 through 7, the writer describes the thoughts and actions of evildoers and the conditions on earth. Evildoers are recognized by their arrogant and boastful words. The implication is that they are proud of their achievements. Their words are like a celebration of their evil actions.

Verse 5 informs us that they "crush" and "oppress" Yahweh's people. Their actions are deliberate. They will not tolerate anyone who professes belief in a sovereign God and chooses to live according to heavenly standards rather than human. This intolerance exists in obvious ways in several areas of the planet, in countries in North Africa and the Middle East, the former Soviet Union, China, Africa. The fact is that there have been more martyrs for their faith in my generation than collectively in all previous generations since Pentecost.

According to Scripture, the treatment by evildoers of widows, immigrants, and orphans is especially reprehensible. Widows, immigrants, and orphans are the people in society who have the fewest resources and the least amount of "clout" in political circles. They require special protection and care. Scripture indicates that they are of special concern to Yahweh. Under the Old Testament law, there was a curse on individuals "who withheld justice from them" (*Deuteronomy 27:18*). Stated positively, God instructed the Israelites to "seek justice, encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, and plead the case of the widow" (*Isaiah 1:17*). Those instructions are repeated with emphasis for New Testament believers.

The evil patterns described by the psalmist had apparently been going on for a long time, and apparently things had deteriorated to the point that the LORD's people were unable to reverse the trend. Righteous protests against evil could no longer be expected to change unjust circumstances. The people who stood for righteous principles were being "crushed" and "oppressed."

I think we will agree that similar conditions exist in our time. Worldwide, millions of people are vulnerable to assault, rape, robbery, and enslavement. The criminal justice system in much of the developing world is so broken that most people at the lower levels of society live without the protection of civil law. Violence, greed, and exploitation are rampant. A few powerful entities control the political and economic conditions of the majority of the world's population.

In the USA, privileged people are becoming wealthier and more powerful while the standards of living for most people are going down. The welfare system, which looks after the needs of women, infants, children, and poor people, has been diminished in recent years. Abortion is common practice. Immigrant and ethnic communities are being denied basic human rights and families are being divided by deportations.

At another level, the justice system is working against traditional marriages and freedom of conscience. Religion is acceptable if practiced in private, but it is losing its influence in the public arena. Our problems today are, in many ways, similar to those described in Psalm 94.

According to verse 7, the individuals who perpetuated evil activities were self-deceived. They imagined that the LORD was blind to their activities, and took no notice of what they were doing. They assumed that there would be no consequences to their actions. These kinds of people can be identified as "functional atheists." They assume that God, if He exists, is irrelevant and not involved in human activities.

Although the wicked claim that God does not see or understand, they are, in reality, "senseless" and "foolish" for thinking this way. They need to wise up to the fact that God is not dead nor is He unaware of earthly circumstances. In the next stanza, verses 8 through 11, the writer refutes the attitudes of the evildoers with several rhetorical questions: Do you really think that the Creator of the ear and the eye can't hear and see what you are doing? Do you really think that the One who disciplines the nations for their misbehaviors will not punish you? Do you think that the One who reveals truth to mankind is unaware of what is going on?

The answer to the questions is given in verse 11: The LORD does indeed know the ways of people, their thoughts, even their intentions and ambitions, and He knows the futility of their arrogant and humanistic attitudes. Only fools would assume that the Creator-God would not know and care about their behaviors.

In contrast to the attitudes and ways of foolish evildoers, the Psalmist, in the next stanza, announces that those who are under the discipline and instruction of the LORD are “blessed.” Scripture declares that “Yahweh disciplines the one whom he loves, even as a father does the son who is dear to him” (*Proverbs 3:12*). When the LORD disciplines His people, the purpose is to guide and hasten their spiritual development. The expectations of the LORD are clearly delineated in the law, which teaches how a person can be in fellowship with, and please, the LORD.

The result of the LORD’s discipline and instruction is described as “relief (or rest) from the days of trouble.” This does not mean that the persecution, ridicule, and suffering of the believer will go away. It means that there will be inner spiritual peace and contentment in the midst of physical trouble. Psalms 91 and 92 described the spiritual security of the person who is under the LORD’s protection. Yahweh made several promises: “I will be with him in trouble,” “I will deliver him and honor him,” “I will rescue him.”

The peace and contentment referenced here was described by David in Psalm 23. He wrote: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil,” and then David added that his experience would be like the LORD “preparing a banquet table for him in the presence of his enemies” (*Psalm 23:4-5*). Back in Psalm 91 the Psalmist described the LORD’s protection this way: “A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you. You will only observe with your eyes” (*Psalm 91:7-8*).

Jesus told His disciples that they would have trouble (tribulation) in the world, but that He had overcome the world and that they could have peace in Him (*John 16:33*). The bottom line is that God provides spiritual security to His people at all times, and especially when they are in the midst of physical dangers.

Individuals who know the law, the ways of God, have hope and confidence about the outcome. Notice in verse 14 that Yahweh will not reject or desert His people. In verse 15, the people of God are assured that judgment and justice will again be restored and that it will be founded on righteousness, God’s righteousness, not any human travesty of justice.

The meaning of the last part of verse 15 is not very clear. Let me interpret it in context, starting in verse 14: "The LORD will not reject his people; he will never forsake his inheritance. Judgment based on true righteousness will again be established, as will all those who are upright in heart." Verse 15 assures us that there will be a time when the conditions on earth will be set right, when the "upright in heart" will be given, by God Himself, the recognition they deserve.

Verses 16 through 23 are the Psalmist's personal testimony. Notice the several references to "me" and "my." These verses focus on God's faithfulness. In these verses the writer describes how he survived his experience with wicked people.

The stanza begins with two rhetorical questions. In view of statements about what the LORD will do for the person who is "upright in heart," the writer asks "Who will rise up for me?" and "Who will take a stand for me?" The answer to these questions is in verses 17 through 19: Only the LORD was capable of providing the protection needed by the Psalmist. His situation was so desperate that, "If the Lord had not been there to help," his life would soon have ended. When he realized that his "foot was slipping," it was the LORD Who supported him. "When anxiety was great within him," it was the LORD's consolation which brought joy to his soul.

The two expressions "rise up" and "take a stand" (*verse 16*) both refer to the position that Yahweh will take against evildoers in defense of His people. On behalf of the Psalm writer, God did what He promised to do. The Psalmist experienced the faithfulness of God in his life, and this was the basis of his assurance about the future.

In the introduction of this Psalm, the writer boldly asked the LORD how long it would be before He would rise up to judge the wicked. In the last stanza of the Psalm there is a similar question, which I want to paraphrase: How is it possible for You, O LORD, to put up with a corrupt throne? How long will You allow corruption to co-exist with You? How long will You permit evildoers to "band together against the righteous and condemn the innocent to death?"

These words indicate that wickedness on earth had become institutionalized. References to the “corrupt throne” and “bringing on misery by decrees” (legal decisions), and “banding together” suggest a seat of political and corporate authority that sanctioned injustice and oppression — a governmental system set up, not to punish evil-doers, which it is supposed to do according to New Testament teaching (*see Romans 13:1-4*), but to promote wickedness. The Psalmist knew that Yahweh would someday destroy this system.

The Psalmist also knew that the LORD was his fortress of protection, and that the LORD would “repay evildoers for their sins and destroy them for their wickedness.” The opening lines of this Psalm identified the LORD as “the God who avenges.” The old King James Version of the Bible rendered that statement as “God to whom vengeance belongeth.” This is what believers need to keep in mind. Retribution is God’s responsibility.

The Apostle Paul gave specific instructions about this to his readers in Rome: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ... Do not take revenge, ... but leave room for God’s wrath,” and then he quoted from the Old Testament law: “‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (*Romans 12:17, 19*).

Retribution and judgment are God’s responsibility. As believers, we may appeal to Him to act, knowing that He is the “Judge of the earth,” knowing that He is fully aware of human behaviors, that He is concerned with the welfare of His people, and committed to the fulfillment of His promises. We can pray “how long?” We can ask God to hasten the appearance of the LORD, who is “the Judge of the earth.”

It is important that we think and act like the writer of this Psalm, especially in times such as ours when the wicked are prospering and the pressures on the righteous are increasing. What must we do? We must commit ourselves more than ever to live faithfully and obediently, and to draw strength from God’s Word. As the Apostle Peter wrote: we must “live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse us of doing wrong, they may see our good works and glorify God on the day he visits us.”