

When the Wicked (Seem to) Win

Psalms 10

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Music and poetry are powerful media that help human beings express their emotions, feelings, and thoughts on a variety of issues. You have probably had a song resonate with you so strongly that it moved you to tears. Similarly, poetry can be wonderfully vivid, communicating concepts that hundreds of pages would struggle to describe. This is the power of music and poetry.

It is no surprise, then, that the Bible makes use of this genre, because God created it! The Book of Psalms is made up of 150 different poems, many of which were originally set to music. The music has been lost to history (and likely wouldn't work as well once translated into English), but these psalms vividly depict the world of their writers. They show us the struggle, but also the triumph of faith. I suspect that as we study several of these psalms over the next few months, you'll resonate with the experience of the authors. Hopefully, you will also find strength and encouragement to turn your eyes to our great God and find strength in Him.

How to Read Psalms

Before we begin our study, it's important to discuss a few things about the book of Psalms, because it provides some unique challenges. **First, each chapter stands on its own.** Each chapter is its own psalm (or song). That's why we refer to "Psalm 23" as opposed to "Psalms 23". We are not referring to a chapter in a book, but a song in a hymnal. In most books there is a continuous story being told from one chapter to another, but that is not the case in the book of Psalms. Each chapter stands on its own.

Second, psalms are poetic. Even if you are not one to pick up a book of poems, you probably have a lot of song lyrics that live in the recesses of your mind. Something you have probably learned is that those words don't always mean what they seem to on the surface. Many poems and songs use imagery intended to evoke something much bigger. Those images may not directly correlate with the thing they're describing but give a sense of it. We must be careful to read each psalm as a whole, keeping its context in mind. Sometimes psalms use imagery that isn't intended to be taken literally.

Third, the psalms are personal. The beauty of the psalms is that they are often an unvarnished look into the lives of faithful people. The writers give vent to their frustrations, their anger, their doubts, and their feelings of hopelessness. There are even times when they show their anger toward God. While this honesty is refreshing, we must be careful how we read these passages. God inspired these psalms, but that doesn't mean every sentiment or statement expressed in them is true. They accurately communicate the feelings of the psalmist, but those feelings may not be good or accurate. We must always use scripture to interpret scripture; if something written in a psalm contradicts a clear teaching in another part of scripture, we must remember that the psalms often speak about how things feel, not always about how they really are.

How He Feels

That brings us into our passage today, which is Psalm 10. We don't know who the author is, but we get a quick glimpse of how he feels in the opening line,

O Lord, why do you stand so far away? Why do you hide when I am in trouble?
(Psalm 10:1, NLT)

Right off the bat, He begins by charging the Lord with inaction. Maybe even more than that, He charges the Lord with cowardice! This is a perfect example of an author describing how a situation feels, even if it isn't actually correct. The Lord was not far away or hiding...but it sometimes feels that way.

The psalmist makes these accusations against the Lord, and we are jarred by his words, because they seem almost blasphemous. Who would dare talk to the Lord this way? Why did God not simply wipe him off the face of the earth after such an unjust accusation?

I think it's because he was being honest! He felt like the Lord had abandoned him and was being passive. He felt like the Lord should be springing into action, and He wasn't. Many of us have felt this way. We have felt like the Lord ought to be doing something but are disappointed when He doesn't act in the way (or timing) we think He should. Often, we don't give voice to those feelings. Sometimes we pretend like they're not there at all. What the psalmist does is helpful, he expresses these feelings so he can deal with them. The Lord is not bothered by our honesty, but He does desire us to seek truth.

That is one of the things I love about the psalms. Even in the passages where the author gives full vent to his anger, putting his doubt on full display, and expressing frustration with the Lord and with the world in ways that make us uncomfortable, there is almost always a pivot-point. There is usually a point where the writer moves from relying on his own perspective, to reminding himself of what He knows is true.

It is ok for us to be honest about our frustrations with God. They are real, so we might as well admit them. But can't stop there. We must continue working through those feelings so we can stand on what we know is true. If we never move beyond our own perspective, nothing will change. But sometimes exhausting our own emotions and knowledge brings us to a place where we can stand and rest in the knowledge of who God is, and come to a place of trust and rest, even if the situation hasn't changed.

The Wicked

As we continue in the passage, we see what it is that has made the psalmist frustrated at the Lord's seeming inaction.

² The wicked arrogantly hunt down the poor. Let them be caught in the evil they plan for others. ³ For they brag about their evil desires; they praise the greedy and curse the Lord. ⁴ The wicked are too proud to seek God. They seem to think that God is dead. ⁵ Yet they succeed in everything they do. They do not see your punishment awaiting them. They sneer at all their enemies. ⁶ They think, "Nothing

bad will ever happen to us! We will be free of trouble forever!" ⁷ Their mouths are full of cursing, lies, and threats. Trouble and evil are on the tips of their tongues. ⁸ They lurk in ambush in the villages, waiting to murder innocent people. They are always searching for helpless victims. Like lions crouched in hiding, they wait to pounce on the helpless. Like hunters they capture the helpless and drag them away in nets. ¹⁰ Their helpless victims are crushed; they fall beneath the strength of the wicked. ¹¹ The wicked think, "God isn't watching us! He has closed his eyes and won't even see what we do!" (Psalm 10:2-11, NLT)

The crux of the issue in the mind of the writer was that wicked people seemed to be getting away with their evil deeds without any punishment. They oppressed people, they lied, they cheated, they stole, they stubbornly refused to submit to God, and yet, it felt like nothing bad happened to them. The psalmist laments, wondering why God doesn't just wipe these people out?!

We can resonate with this feeling, can't we? Many who are getting rich, who are in positions of power and authority, who seem to be enjoying the most ease, are the same ones living in outright rebellion of God. It sure seems like God ought to just put them in their place and show them that they are not nearly as powerful as they think they are. That's essentially what the writer of Psalm 10 is asking God to do.

But one of the dangers we face any time we see a list of things that describe wicked people, is to simply gloss over the list of charges, because we figure they don't describe us. But when we do that, we miss an opportunity to see our own sin and failures and correct them. Often, we bear more in common with the wicked than we might like to admit. We must examine these charges to see if we are guilty of the same crimes.

There are several traits condemned in these verses. **The first is arrogance.** The arrogance described in these verses is an arrogance toward the Lord. In verse 4, he says "The seem to think that God is dead." I think the decision to translate it this way was to bring to mind the well-known philosopher Friederich Nietzsche, who famously wrote, "God is dead, and we've killed him." Nietzsche's point wasn't that we had actually killed God, but that the notion of God was a myth we used to explain the things we didn't understand. Now that our knowledge and understanding has grown, we no longer have need for a god—in essence, we have killed Him.

This is the height of arrogance, but it is a pervasive belief today. Many refer to belief in God as mere superstition. They talk about Christians as antiquated and out of touch with the realities of the modern world. These statements presuppose that we know more than God! The psalmist condemns this attitude, because he sees where it leads.

If God is dead (or not real) then it doesn't matter how I live. If there is no God, then there is no reason to deny myself any pleasure. If there is no God, there is no justice, so I can oppress people if it benefits me. We are seeing the effect of this belief throughout our world today.

You may say, but I'm a Christian! I'm in church! Obviously this doesn't describe me! Oh, but it might. We often live as what has become termed "practical atheists." We claim to believe in God, but we live as though He doesn't exist. Our religion has little effect past Sunday morning. We know God gives us commands about how to live, but we choose to ignore them. We say we believe God will punish sin, and that His way is better, but we often choose to go our own way. This too is arrogant. It is the mark of someone who believes they know better than God. We must be on the lookout for such attitudes in our own lives and work to weed them out, remembering God will not be mocked.

The second thing the psalmist condemns is greed. He condemns those who lie in wait, setting traps for others and fleecing those who cannot defend themselves. In our current economic climate, we feel this innately. The richest people in the world are becoming vastly richer, while most of us are struggling to keep pace with prices that are constantly on the rise.

Once again, you may conclude you are not guilty of this. But how often do you say, I don't care about this because it doesn't affect me? If we are only concerned about how things impact our lives, without regard for the way it impacts those around us, we too are greedy! If we only act in our own best interest, then we are no different than those the psalmist condemns here. Instead, we should be looking out for the people everyone else overlooks. We should try to care for those who cannot care for themselves. Such people will likely never be able to repay us. On paper, they offer no return on investment. But that shouldn't be the driving force in our decisions. We should be driven by what's right, not by what will best affect our bottom line.

Third, he condemns lying. The wicked use their mouths to tear down others and to deceive others to get ahead. Politicians are great at this. They call it "spin". They try to manipulate facts to make a story look a certain way. Most of us do this, even if it's not a conscious effort. We choose to leave out parts of a story that make us look bad. We choose to leave out details that don't fit our narrative. We choose to subtly deceive people—even ourselves—by the information we choose to consider when arriving at our conclusions. We ignore things that don't support our preconceived notions.

Jesus, by contrast, gives a simple principle: let your yes be yes, and your no be no. (Matthew 5:37) What this means is that we should deal honestly and directly with others. We shouldn't engage in "spin" because that's really lying. When we mess up, we should admit it and seek to correct it. When we're representing the position of another, we should do so fairly and accurately. Anything less than this is lying. While you may argue that you don't do the same thing that politicians, CEOs, and lawyers do, the difference is one of degree, not of category.

The psalmist gives numerous examples in these verses of the wicked acting wickedly. His argument is that when the Lord doesn't immediately punish their sin, it emboldens them and hardens them. We resonate with this statement. Many have become so entrenched in their sinful ways that they scoff at the things of God. But we must also recognize that the same can happen to us. We can begin to presume upon the grace of

God. We can convince ourselves that while we may have these wicked traits as well, because we're not as bad as the worst people, we can persist in our sin. We can't. And only a fool believes the consequences of our sin will never come.

Call to Action and Pivot

After laying out the charges against the wicked, the writer asks the Lord to act,

¹² Arise, O Lord! Punish the wicked, O God! Do not ignore the helpless! ¹³ Why do the wicked get away with despising God? They think, "God will never call us to account." ¹⁴ But you see the trouble and grief they cause. You take note of it and punish them. The helpless put their trust in you. You defend the orphans.

¹⁵ Break the arms of these wicked, evil people! Go after them until the last one is destroyed. (Psalm 10:12-15, NLT)

The psalmist calls on God to spring into action, to break the arms (or the power) of the wicked. He calls God to flex His muscles and show the people that they cannot act with impunity. He has been frustrated at what seems like God's inaction and he now calls on God to intervene!

Verse 14, however, is where we see the pivot. He begins with the word "but". In other words, the psalmist recognizes that all the wickedness he sees in the world is real, but what is not correct is that God is passive or hiding. While the psalmist is honest about his desire for the Lord to punish the wicked right here and now, he also remembers an important truth: the Lord sees it all. Those who are oppressed need not worry, because the Lord defends the helpless and the orphans.

The concluding verses of the psalm show his change of heart,

¹⁶ The Lord is king forever and ever! The godless nations will vanish from the land. ¹⁷ Lord, you know the hopes of the helpless. Surely you will hear their cries and comfort them. ¹⁸ You will bring justice to the orphans and the oppressed, so mere people can no longer terrify them. (Psalm 10:16-18, NLT)

What a difference we see from the beginning of the psalm! At the beginning, the psalmist condemned God for failing to act, but at the end, he reiterates God's sovereign control over all things. He reminds himself that the Lord will ensure justice is served. He finds comfort in God's character. He does not need to worry that the wicked will get away with their sin, because the Lord will be victorious. He knows how the story ends—so he doesn't need to worry that the Lord hasn't acted yet. He has confidence in His character. The best remedy to our doubts and questions is to remind ourselves of the character of God. Then, no matter what happens, we can turn to Him in praise and rest in Him in faith.

Conclusion

As we wrap up Psalm 10 today, I want to draw some lessons we can learn from it. **First, we must weed out wickedness from our own lives.** It is easy for us to see the wickedness in the world around us. We live in a world that acts as though there is no God, and that they can live as they see fit with impunity. As Christians, we know that is

not the case. There will be a reckoning. But we often live like there won't be. We know what God says to do, but we still go our own way, believing we know better. We excuse our sin because we believe God will forgive us. We need to see that we are not so different from those we would hold up as examples of wickedness in our world—we are different only in degree. We must be diligent in weeding out our wicked attitudes and behaviors. The remedy is sound theology. Do not fall prey to the lie that God is passive and will not act. He will, and we should make sure we are standing on His side.

Second, just because God hasn't acted doesn't mean He won't. There are a lot of times when we feel like the psalmist. We look at our world and do not understand why God allows evil to persist. Sometimes we experience tragedy and injustice and ask why God doesn't intervene. Those times can cause a crisis of faith, because to our minds, it seems like the Lord should act. When He doesn't, we may be tempted to ask, is God real?

A common argument against the existence of God goes like this:

A good God would not permit evil to exist;

Evil does exist;

Therefore, God must not be good or must be helpless to stop evil.

The problem with this argument is the first statement. It isn't true. It puts our wisdom over His! It assumes God cannot have a good reason to allow evil to persist for a time. I believe He does have a reason and a purpose for delaying His justice. God has promised to punish evil once and for all. He will eradicate evil from all creation. Justice is coming, it just hasn't arrived yet. And we may not see it until the end of all things. But we must remember: justice deferred is not the same as justice denied. Just because He hasn't acted yet doesn't mean He won't. He will.

Third, faith means clinging to Him because we know He will be victorious. This is an important take-home in our world today. It feels like evil is winning. Those who seek the things of this world seem to be gaining them with impunity. And we feel like we are left to suffer. But faith in God means remembering that He will ultimately be victorious. It means remembering that worldly success won't last. We must play the long game. We must remember that God's way is best. Rather than throwing up our hands in despair, or wringing our hands in fear, we should cling to our Lord and His Word. In the times when we are tempted to doubt, we should recount what we know to be true, because God's character is sufficient for every situation.

The psalms echo the struggles of faith. They show us people who know what is true about God, but struggle to put it into practice. You may have times when you feel like the writer of Psalm 10. I hope you'll follow his example. Lay out your concerns, your feelings, and your frustrations before the Lord...and then remind yourself of God's character. When we hold on to the things we know are true, we will often find our fears, our frustrations, and our anger are consumed by the greatness of our God. When we see Him clearly, we can walk through life with confidence—no matter what may come.

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