



Catalog No. 7246

Psalms 9, 10

Part II

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April 1st, 2007

AN UNFINISHED MEDITATION ON PSALMS 9 AND 10

PART II: "HAS GOD FORGOTTEN?"

Introduction

Psalm 10, as a continuation of a single poem beginning with Psalm 9 or as an independent Psalm, is a relentless examination of the power of evil in the face of a seemingly unknowing, unseeing, or uncaring God. After posing the problem that the poet confronts in verses 1-2, the next ten verses describe the heart, soul, and actions of evil. After what feels like a dismal eternity to a slow and careful reader, the Psalmist finally breaks forth in faith in the final seven verses. Significantly, however, while Psalm 10 ends with a statement of faith in Yahweh as King, the one who cares for the afflicted, there is no situational change described: that is, David has reached a point of faith, but his circumstances are unchanged.

The nature of the problem confronted by David is very different than that in the companion Psalm 9. There, the poet's focus was on God's judgment of the nations. Here, the evil that has arisen is "within the camp" or "within the family." It is a story of the grinding down of the hapless, unfortunate, poor, and needy in the vice grip of sophisticated, calculating, resource-laden evil.

To illustrate some of the dynamics of Psalm 10, I want to examine it from the perspectives of the speakers or actors of the poem: the Lord, the Wicked, and the Afflicted. Each has a perspective on the others, and much can be learned by paying careful attention to the way these perspectives are developed. Finally, since this is Palm Sunday, and Holy Week is upon us, I want to close with some reflections on how Psalm 10 resonates in the agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

10:1-2 – Where is the Lord?

Without delay or soft-pedaling, David begins Psalm 10 with an accusation of God that stems from his frustration or anger regarding the failure of the Lord to judge the evil actions of the wicked:

Why do You stand afar off, O LORD?

Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?

In pride the wicked hotly pursue the afflicted;

Let them be caught in the plots which they have devised. (Psalm 10:1-2 NASB)

David pictures God being absent when his presence is most to be desired and expected: in times of oppression. The phrase "in times of trouble" is made up of the same two Hebrew words that were in Psalm 9:9.¹ There, David recognized that his Lord was a stronghold for the oppressed "in times of trouble." Obviously, something has gone wrong. Those very moments when God triumphantly judges in Psalm 9 are, in Psalm 10, times in which God is hidden or far away.

Instead of the evil being punished and the afflicted being protected, we find the wicked in hot pursuit of the afflicted, persecuting and oppressing. David immediately offers up a prayer that is a typical cry for justice in the Psalms: "Let them be caught in the plots which they have devised." When we looked at Psalm 9 last week, we saw how David used hunting imagery to make this point. Although the images in Psalm 10 differ somewhat, we will, nonetheless, find a lion on the hunt appears in this psalm too.

Most of us can readily picture sometime in our lives when it seemed like the "wrong guy" was winning: the bully in junior high school that no one would stand up to; the teacher's pet who got away with everything; the arrogant, womanizing boss. As hurtful and unjust as these situations are, David is thinking more broadly in Psalm 10. In addition to evil as it occurs in personal relationships, he is also pondering institutionalized kinds of oppression: the rich systematically exploiting the poor, those with the resources using every possible social mechanism to insure their continued access to those resources, etc. For the next nine verses David will spell out what this evil is like, the mind set that nurtures it, and how it grinds down and eventually kills the unfortunate.

10:3-6 – The Wicked and God

Logically, David begins by exploring the religion of the wicked. You could call their religion "functional atheism"² – a denial of the existence of God in terms of the actions one takes. God may be there, but he is irrelevant. The wicked feels free to engage in any and all actions without having to fear the judgment and justice of the Lord.

For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire,

And the greedy man curses and spurns the LORD.

The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him.

All his thoughts are, "There is no God."

His ways prosper at all times;

Your judgments are on high, out of his sight;

As for all his adversaries, he snorts at them.

He says to himself, "I will not be moved;

Throughout all generations I will not be in adversity." (10:3-6)

I have had the privilege in this last year of beginning to learn Hebrew. I am most definitely a beginner, and I translate very slowly. When I learned that I was going to teach here this week and last, I decided to translate Psalms 9 and 10 from Hebrew as part of my preparation. I stumbled my way through, sometimes taking as much as an hour on a verse. Working through verses 3-11 was depressing. For over a week I was dictionary-deep in the words of evil, day after day finding more arrogance and oppression.

Part of the weight I felt comes from the accuracy of David's description. Look at our culture. We also are a nation of people who act as atheists in our actions: material wealth and immense greed characterize us. We are viewed by much of the rest of the world as arrogant and godless. No wonder the Islamic nations hate us. Wherever the English language has gone, corruption and materialism follow. Democracy and freedom, or at least the pretensions thereto, have given fallen men and women the opportunity to sin more freely. And they do.

In order to get some word pictures from these verses, I took some of the key words and phrases and looked for matching Old Testament uses. I Kings 20 tells the story of the war between Ben-Hadad of Syria and the evil Israelite King Ahab. Ben-Hadad was outrageously boastful in his treatment of Yahweh's people. He was above all concern about the grace and protection of Yahweh, even when Israel was ruled by a wicked fool like Ahab. Second Chronicles 26 tells the story of how King Uzziah's success and power made him haughty. He attempted to seize for himself the power of the levitical priests. Even King Hezekiah of Judah, whom we normally think of as being a godly ruler, became arrogant and overweening in the midst of a reign blessed by the Lord.

This section ends with the kind of boast that we expect would receive immediate punishment from God. The wicked have become supremely confident in their secure position and are comfortable thinking that this will last forever. Surely the Lord will break in here! But David doesn't go there yet. Instead he focuses on how their perspective of God leads them to oppressive actions against the afflicted. Verse 5 sets the tone: "As for his adversaries, he snorts at them."

10:7-10 – The Wicked and the Afflicted

If there is no fear in the wicked of the justice of God, then nothing restrains the wicked from total exploitation of the afflicted, poor, and needy. The results are predictable: oppression, corruption, and abuse of power.

His mouth is full of curses and deceit and oppression;

Under his tongue is mischief and wickedness.

He sits in the lurking places of the villages;

In the hiding places he kills the innocent;

His eyes stealthily watch for the unfortunate.

He lurks in a hiding place as a lion in his lair;

He lurks to catch the afflicted;

**He catches the afflicted when he draws him into his net.
He crouches, he bows down,
And the unfortunate fall by his mighty ones. (10:7-10)**

Recall that Psalm 9 was focused on the great victory of God over the nations. In Psalm 10, we encounter everyday, but still very powerful, wickedness. This is the wickedness that is integrated into the fabric of our daily lives. It lies unseen in villages and local hang-outs. It is stealthy and powerful. It catches by surprise because it knows all of the ins and outs of the local environment and it easily traps those who can't work the system in their favor, who aren't in the local network, or who stand outside the norms of local life and custom.

Recall that in Psalm 9, David used hunting imagery to show how God judges – how he saves those who know his name and how he obliterates the wicked. In Psalm 10, a wild lion is loose in your very own village. The intended prey has become the hunter. And what a hunter! The lion is a tremendously powerful, but eerily silent hunter. Spying out its victims, it crouches in wait, saving all its vast energy for the final spring. David does not mention a net or a pit that will catch this lion. Instead, this is a vision of nightmare terror, when the friendly environment of a local village becomes the scene of bloody slaughter in an outrageously uneven contest of power.

The final image in verse 10 is especially poignant. Evil works through its champions. The mastermind behind it all doesn't get his own hands dirty. No, this massacre is for his minions to complete. In the image of village life, the mighty ones would be the village leaders and authorities, legitimate or informal, who “run things.” If you don't pay your dues to these local wielders of power, if you refuse to toe the line, then you are the next victim.

From the Old Testament I found images and stories of “deceit” (verse 7) especially interesting:

- Jacob obtaining, with his mother's help, the blessing from Isaac that should, by right, have gone to Esau (Gen 27:35)
- The lie told by the sons of Israel to Shechem and his son after the rape of Dinah (Gen 34:13).
- Finally, deceit as the great weapon of anti-christ as described in Daniel 8:25:

**And through his shrewdness
He will cause deceit to succeed by his influence;
And he will magnify himself in his heart,
And he will destroy many while they are at ease.
He will even oppose the Prince of princes,
But he will be broken without human agency. (Dan 8:25)**

The implications of this imagery for today are omnipresent: it's not what you know, it's who you know; nepotism and favoritism in every professional field; secret deals done among the powerful few for their own advantage; the silencing of opposition in a thousand creative ways; the disappearance of the godly as one by one they are hunted down and destroyed. This is how the wicked behave when they have no fear of the judgment and justice of God. It can happen in your city, your workplace, your family, and even in your church. We will see in a moment how it happened to Jesus.

10:11 – Functional Atheism

In verse 11, David brings us back to his central thesis or foundational insight:

**He says to himself, “God has forgotten;
He has hidden His face; He will never see it.” (10:11)**

In the peripheral vision of the wicked are a denied God and the contemptuous poor and afflicted. At the deepest place of his heart is the conviction that God is not there. There is no source of justice in this world. I am on my own.

What would you do if you believed that you would never, in this life or any possible other, never have to give an account for your actions? How would you act if you did not believe in a God who judges? Would you behave differently if there was never going to be a time in which right-doing was rewarded and wrong-doing punished?

David clearly sees that this mind set is what guides and drives the wicked to do what they do: oppress the afflicted. When the curtain goes down, when the lights are turned out, no one will be there to make sure that all is well. All is not well, and it never will be. Do what pleases you. Live for yourself in the time that you have.

10:12-15 – You Have Seen It!

But this is intolerable for David. He knows better. Finally, after this extended examination of evil and injustice, his faith rises up and he says that the Lord will... the Lord will.... What exactly will the Lord do?

**Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up Your hand.
Do not forget the afflicted.
Why has the wicked spurned God?
He has said to himself, “You will not require it.”
You have seen it, for You have beheld mischief and
vexation to take it into Your hand.
The unfortunate commits himself to You;
You have been the helper of the orphan.
Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer,
Seek out his wickedness until You find none. (10:12-15)**

David's hope is clear. He longs, yet again, for God to raise his powerful right hand in judgment. He calls upon God to arise and remember. Remembering is an enormously important topic in the Psalms. When God remembers, he doesn't just recall facts that are potentially forgettable. When he remembers, he acts. Specifically, he judges – to the great benefit of those who know and love him, and to the great defeat of those who spurn and mock him.

I have just begun exploring some of the ancient thinking about memory. It is an extremely significant concept – far more than recalling someone's name or storing up facts for a test. The Hebrew notion is inextricably bound up with God's action of justice and his covenant promises. Roman thinking about memory centers on honor and glory. One of the great penalties which could come against a criminal in court was called *damnatio memoriae*: a deliberate, physical erasure of your name from public inscriptions and the smashing of all statues bearing your image, as well as a public ban on any mention of your name and on any kind of funeral or memorial rights for you. It was a formal enforcement of forgetting.³ St. Augustine was fascinated by memory, and wrote extensively about it, perhaps most intriguingly in Book X of the *Confessions*. Just after recounting the story of his conversion, and then, significantly, of the death of his mother, Augustine took an entire book (we would call it a chapter) to explore memory: how it works, why he forgets, how he can rise to the knowledge of God through his memory. I am confident that “memory” in the Psalms is a topic that will yield rich fruit for me in the future, and I am looking forward to learning more as I continue my slow progress through the Psalms.

But even given a very close relationship between memory and justice, we must see the difference in these verses between what the Psalmist requests or wishes and what he says God actually is doing or has done. His prayer is that God will judge, in verse 12. He also takes into account the ongoing commitment of the wicked, in verse 13. But what he states that God has actually done is “seen... beheld... become a helper to the orphan.” There is no statement that the Lord has judged and that all wrongs have been righted. We do hear David recognize that God has become a helper to the orphan, but when this section ends (indeed, when the entire poem ends), we remain in a position of waiting for God's judgment on the wicked.

While we wait, the gift that we receive is hope, because God has seen and known. David knows his Lord. When the time comes ultimately to judge, the Lord will do so with righteousness and justice. David's task, when he asks the Lord to remember, is to enter into his own memory – to find there the things that the Lord has already done.

There is also in this section a beautiful exhortation to live by while we wait for God's justice. The NASB, which I am using here, says that “the unfortunate commits himself to You.” The word commits is normally translated “abandoned.” When calling upon God to judge in justice, to relieve oppression and remember his covenant promises, we can fling ourselves upon him, utterly abandon ourselves to him.

Finally, this section ends with words that once again echo Psalm 9: “Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer, seek out his wickedness until You find none.” The seeking out and being able to find nothing is exactly what David foresaw as the destiny of the wicked nations in Psalm 9. Here the image is brought into his own nation, as the people of Israel oppress and deceive one another.

10:16-18 – The End of Terror

In closing Psalm 10, David gives a vision of hope based on his Lord, who is Judge of the nations and of the humble; he is a King who hears and remembers, who strengthens hearts and takes a stand for the oppressed. The end of it all, as

in Psalm 9, is that mere mortals will know their place upon the earth. They will no longer be terrorists, because their power to create terror has been countered by Yahweh's greater power and concern for those who have been so long crushed beneath the intolerable burdens of this world.

The LORD is King forever and ever;
Nations have perished from His land.
O LORD, You have heard the desire of the humble;
You will strengthen their heart, You will incline Your ear
To vindicate the orphan and the oppressed,
So that man who is of the earth will no longer cause terror. (10:16-18)

These beautiful verses bring us to the end of the poem. For me, the journey through Psalms 9 and 10 is not completed. I have shared some of my thinking with you about them as far as I have been able to develop it. But I have by no means plumbed the depths of what is available in this long acrostic poem. But I want to change focus, and for a few minutes land my thinking about Psalm 10 in Holy Week.

Conclusion – Jesus, the Afflicted One

Earlier in this service, we heard several sections of Matthew 26. These verses tell the story of Jesus in Gethsemane. In Gethsemane I would like to join Jesus and use Psalm 10 as a point of departure to contemplate the agonies of our Lord Jesus as he became the afflicted one on our behalf. By contemplating Jesus in Gethsemane I will offer you a challenge for this coming Holy Week: Do what the disciples could not do. Take an hour and watch and pray with Jesus. Use the abundant opportunities that Holy Week provides to remember what our Lord has done for us.

To set the stage, we must remember the background of Holy Week. We have been reminded this morning of the glory of Palm Sunday – the great glory of the King as he entered into Jerusalem. When Jesus encountered the leaders of Jerusalem, he quoted a verse from Psalm 8 to them, reminding them of God's invincible power to bring glory to himself through the mouths of children. But in true Psalm 10 fashion, the leaders of Israel "hotly pursued" Jesus. Matthew writes:

Then the chief priests and the elders of the people were gathered together in the court of the high priest, named Caiaphas; and they plotted together to seize Jesus by stealth and kill Him. But they were saying, "Not during the festival, otherwise a riot might occur among the people." (Matt 26:3-5)

Even the words of Psalm 10 can be found here: stealth, kill – precisely the approach and goal of the wicked for the afflicted.

When Jesus arrived in triumph in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the religious leaders were, at first, stuck. They could follow Jesus' movements in public, but in that context they could not confront him directly, much less arrest him. But his private movements were elusive. They did not seem to know where to find him at moments where more direct confrontation would have been possible.

It is easy to forget the historical context that made these days so vivid and powerful for those who lived in them. I continue to recommend for everyone who likes historical fiction the novel by Louis De Wohl, *The Spear*.⁴ It is great Holy Week reading. For now, let's note that, during the Passover celebration, many of the local power structures were not firmly in the hands of the chief priests and the elders of the people. With the huge numbers of pilgrims pouring into the city, it was not easy to trace all the activities of a single man.

As Jesus continued to teach in Jerusalem, his popularity seemed to grow. But then comes the High Priest's break: one of Jesus' followers shows up with an offer to betray Jesus in secret. If they could use this fool, this hapless weakling, as their pawn, they might be able to eliminate Jesus quietly and secretly. Yes, they could hurry a trial through in the middle of the night and have the whole unpleasant business done while most of the people were sleeping.

And Judas, of course, knows about Jesus' movements in private. This is useful information and they can get it for a bargain price from this pathetic man. For a paltry thirty pieces of silver they have someone who can lead them to their prey. Quietly they set their plans in motion, like a lion, lurking in his lair, eyes stealthily watching for its prey. The send their mighty ones, the temple guards, to do the dirty work for them.

We do not know for certain what Jesus knew about all that was happening around the city as the powers of Jerusalem relentlessly closed their nets about him. He knew what was going on Judas' heart, and he also was carrying the

agony of knowing that his beloved disciples would run at the first sign of danger. How deeply hurtful must have been the encounter given in Matthew 26:31-35:

Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP OF THE FLOCK SHALL BE SCATTERED.' But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee." But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away." Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this *very* night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times." Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You." All the disciples said the same thing too. (26:31-35)

Peter, Peter, Peter. You have no idea what you are about to face, the Lord must have thought. How great was the need for prayer for Peter. Satan would be rampant tonight, and so Jesus had to pray. And so he goes to Gethsemane to pray. His turmoil is profound as he senses more and more acutely the approaching pain of the bitter cup prepared for him by the sins of men. He seeks support from his friends:

"Sit here while I go over there and pray." And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me." And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."

When He returns to his friends, he finds them fast asleep. With an extremely heavy heart, knowing that events had come to a climax, He says:

"So, you *men* could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away again a second time and prayed, saying, "My Father, if this cannot pass away unless I drink it, Your will be done." Again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. And He left them again, and went away and prayed a third time, saying the same thing once more. (26:40b-44)

In Luke's account, some manuscripts have an angel who comes to Jesus to strengthen him. This is a beautiful image of Psalm 10:17 in which David says that the Lord strengthens the heart of the meek.

Then He came to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Behold, the hour is at hand and the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!" (26:45-46)

Clearly Jesus lived out Psalm 10:14 by abandoning himself to his Father in Gethsemane. Everyone else would soon be gone. Tragically, in one of his darkest hours, Jesus' disciples utterly failed him. First, they fail Jesus spiritually. How significant it is for us that their failure was a failure to pray. How desperately we need to cultivate our times of prayer. The warning could not be clearer than it is here: "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation." And, not surprisingly, the spiritual betrayal has intensely practical implications. Just like the wicked in Psalm 10 have a philosophy of life that ignores the justice of God, so the disciples' failure to pray opens the door for the seizure of Jesus by the forces of evil in Gethsemane.

While He was still speaking, behold, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a large crowd with swords and clubs, *who came from the chief priests and elders of the people*. Now he who was betraying Him gave them a sign, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him." Immediately Judas went to Jesus and said, "Hail, Rabbi!" and kissed Him. And Jesus said to him, "Friend, *do* what you have come for." Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him. (26:47-50) . . . Then all the disciples left Him and fled. (26:56b)

Judas had come to his Master with a kiss, but "His mouth [was] full of curses and deceit and oppression; under his tongue [was] mischief and wickedness." And then, they seized him, their prey was caught. The Lion of Judah had been trapped by the Lurking Lion of Psalm 10.

Those who had seized Jesus led Him away to Caiaphas, the high priest, where the scribes and the elders were gathered together. (26:57)

Betrayed and alone, Jesus faces the princes of darkness, the wicked who are the masters of power in this world.

The more I read Matthew's account of Jesus' last days in Jerusalem, and the final hours of his life on Good Friday, I am increasingly impressed by how much

Matthew focuses on the verbal and emotional pain that Jesus experienced during these hours. It was bad enough in Gethsemane and in the following trials that he endured, but it continues on the cross. Even one of the thieves who is crucified with him reviles him. The religious leaders come to gloat over him. Even the crowds, always fickle, turn against him.

But these ugly events – the hurried trials and buying off of the Romans, the scourging, mocking, beatings, the crown of thorns, the crucifixion itself – all lie ahead of us this week. What I am pleading for you to do is remember these events prayerfully. Every one of them is worth a lifetime of contemplation. What we need is to remember.

So, I put the challenge to you: find an appropriate section of Scripture and make it your centerpiece for meditation during this Holy Week. Use Psalm 10 if it suits your thinking and place in life. Whatever you choose, do what the disciples failed to do: watch and pray with Jesus, so that you might not enter into temptation.

Next Sunday we will celebrate the glorious triumph of the resurrection. But hold that moment off in your imagination. Instead, use this week to walk with Jesus through the final days of his ministry. Watch Jesus as he prays for you; watch as he creates the sacrament of the Last Supper so that we might feed upon him forever; watch him being tortured on the cross. Pray with him. Confess your heart to him. Enter into his suffering so that you might be part of the Body of Christ, the Afflicted One.

No matter what happens to you, no matter what you face and what you bear, you can say with our afflicted Lord:

Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up Your hand.
Do not forget the afflicted.
Why has the wicked spurned God?
He has said to himself, "You will not require it."
You have seen it, for You have beheld mischief and vexation to take it into
Your hand.
The unfortunate commits himself to You;
You have been the helper of the orphan.
Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer,
Seek out his wickedness until You find none.
The LORD is King forever and ever;
Nations have perished from His land.
O LORD, You have heard the desire of the humble;
You will strengthen their heart, You will incline Your ear
To vindicate the orphan and the oppressed,
So that man who is of the earth will no longer cause terror. (Psalm 10:12-18)

¹ These are the only places in Scripture in which the two Hebrew words for "in times of trouble" are used together like this – providing additional evidence of the unity or correspondence between Psalms 9 and 10. Note, however, the glaring difference in context of the phrase!

² I found this term in Peter C. Craigie, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol 19: Psalms 1-50* (Word Books: Waco, TX), 126.

³ For a recent study on this topic for the Roman period, see Charles W. Hedrick, *History and Silence: Purge and Rehabilitation of Memory in Late Antiquity* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000). For the medieval period, see two books by Mary Carruthers: *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁴ A huge number of books have been written on this topic. De Wohl's *The Spear* is very enlightening and sensitive to the spiritual dynamics of the many players involved.

⁵ Matthew 26:35b-39.

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