

Sermon Given by

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Psalm 10 – “Godless confidence”

Introduction

I came across the following joke in a newspaper in Uganda: An African government minister went to visit the home of an Asian government minister. He was amazed by how lavish it all was. It was an enormous 5 story mansion in the heart of the city, with its own swimming pool and bowling alley, and the African government minister said, ‘how on earth do you manage to afford all this on a government salary?’ The Asian took him up to the roof of his mansion, and he pointed proudly to a gleaming new railway line in the city and said ‘you see that railway line?’, ‘yes’, said the African, ‘I made them pay me 10% of the cost of that railway line as a bribe, in return for my permission to build it. And you see that skyscraper – I also took 10%, and that shopping mall – 10%’. The African minister, needless to say, went home very impressed. 5 years later, he invited the Asian round to his house in Africa. By now, the African had a 10 story mansion in the heart of the city, which was so extravagant that even the Asian minister was amazed by the opulence of it all. ‘How on earth have you managed to afford such an amazing home? he asked’. The African took him up on to the roof and pointed a finger out in to the middle of the most squalid looking slum that the Asian had ever seen and said ‘you see that new highway? – 100%! This joke reflects the way many people in Africa see their governments. Corruption is on such a horrible and blatant scale that people seem to be able to get away with whatever they want. And so the difference between rich and poor is stunning. In Uganda I went into a home where 8 people were sleeping in a room about the size of the kitchen in the North building. The streets of Kampala are lined with small children and cripples begging. All the while the president spends 300 million shillings (about £100,000) every day on his personal lifestyle and bodyguard. I spoke to a university educated Christian who was unable to get a job because he was unwilling to pay a bribe. I spoke to another man who felt convicted of his sin and wanted to be born again, but he knew that if he started being honest at work then he would certainly lose his job. It is hard to look at this and not ask, ‘how is this fair? How can a loving God allow the wicked to prosper, while the poor are downtrodden and have nothing? This is the question that David is asking in this Psalm. How is it that the wicked, the greedy, the godless prosper for year after year, while those they exploit suffer and groan. Three truths about God that I want us to consider as we see David grappling with these issues.

Point 1 – God understands our weakness

Explain: This Psalm goes with Psalm 9. The two Psalms together probably form an acrostic poem – that is, in the Hebrew, the first letter of every other verse spells out the whole Hebrew alphabet. It isn’t an absolutely consistent acrostic poem like Psalm 119, there are a few letters missing here and there, but there are enough of them in place that we can be fairly sure that the two Psalms belong together. Now this is important. Those who were here 2 weeks ago will have looked at Psalm 9. In Psalm 9, we have a picture of David suffering, yet victorious. In Ps 9 v 13 David says ‘**O LORD, see how my enemies persecute me! Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death.**’ David’s life is very difficult indeed,

yet for almost the whole of the Psalm, David is full of praise for God and is absolutely confident that God is good and that he will be victorious in the end.

Psalm 10 is a very different Psalm. David seems much more reflective, much more uncertain, much more like someone who is struggling with doubt and bitterness. V1 he says ***‘why O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble.’*** In Michael Wilcock’s commentary on the Psalms, he says ‘when we describe Psalm 9 as positive and Psalm 10 as negative, we might almost be speaking in photographic terms. The two panels picture the same circumstances, but one is bright with dark shadows, the other is dark with bright gleams’. And so we might have expected the two Psalms to be the other way around. As if David starts out with doubts and uncertainties about the evil in the world, but finds that as he prays the doubts and uncertainties evaporate and are replaced with a clear and victorious faith. And some people expect that the progress they make in their Christian life will be like that – that with each new day we will see more clearly, understand more fully, and have a stronger faith and a holier life. As if our progress in the Christian life should follow a ‘straight line graph’ – gradually making more and more gain with each passing day. Don’t misunderstand me – we trust that if the Holy Spirit lives in us, then over time he will be transforming us into the likeness of the Lord Jesus. We expect to make real progress over time. But in reality we are far more up and down than that. God has made us to be emotional creatures. Things that we feel one day we may not necessarily feel the next day. We may feel very joyful to belong to God one day, and next day feel overwhelmed by the problems of this world. Speaking personally I know how up and down I am, and so I love that there are examples like this in the Psalms of people like David also being very up and down.

I particularly felt this about 5 years ago when I had to watch my father die. I am grateful to God for a wonderful and loving father, and I am grateful that I had him with me up to the age of 23. But he never showed the slightest interest in Christianity, and I believe that he died an unbeliever, not born again, not saved, on April 15th 2005. And this was profoundly difficult for me. I trusted that God is good, and I believed Romans 8:28 – ***“in all things God is working for the good of those who love him and who are called according to his purpose.”*** But there were still times when I believed this joyfully, when thinking about my father’s death even made me feel closer to God and more longing to get out of this world and get to heaven. And there were other times when I felt nothing but loss and misery, and self pity. Very up and down.

And it is wonderfully refreshing to know that this is a legitimate way to be. I reckon God has deliberately given us examples like this in the Psalms to show us just how much **God understands our weakness** and our emotional ups and downs. This kind of thing is profoundly a part of how God has made us. Maybe you’re experiencing this at the moment. If so, then there are at least two lessons to learn: one is to expect it – know that even when you feel in the depths of despair and totally unable to trust God at all it doesn’t mean that you’re a failure as a Christian – those kinds of feelings will be only temporary and even believers like David experienced them sometimes. Eventually, God will give you fresh strength and faith and trust. And the second is to pray. David prayed on through his doubts and uncertainties. The doubts and uncertainties come and go, but we need to do like David in v14, and remind ourselves as we pray of God’s goodness and faithfulness. ***“You, O God,***

do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand.” Trust God, and pray. **He understand our weakness.**

Point 2 – God allows evil for a while (v1-11)

V1 says ***why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*** It is a question that probably most of us can relate to. When life is very hard, it is common to feel distant from God, as if he hides himself. Not that God is more distant in those times, but it can feel that he is hiding himself away. In this case, it isn't hard to work out what is making David feel this way. In v2-11 he spells out exactly what his problem is – or rather the type of person that his problem is. Possibly he has in mind his enemies from within the nation of Israel – he certainly had lots if you read 1 and 2 Samuel. Probably more likely on this occasion he is talking about wicked people in other nations that were attacking him from the outside. He refers to 'the nations' in Psalm 9v15, 17 and Psalm 10v16. Probably this is one of the times when the nation of Israel is under attack from other nations.

Let's look at the kind of wicked person that David is in distress about. This person is arrogant, v2, proud, v4 and haughty, v5. He is driven by greed, v3. V2 he hunts down the weak. V7 he breathes out cursing and lies. V8-10 he deliberately lies in wait to catch and murder innocent people – this is what he spends his time doing. This is a nasty piece of work. And at heart, the reason for all this wickedness is that this person has rejected God. V3 he reviles the Lord. V4 In all his thoughts there is no room for God. v11, probably the most outrageous and blatant verse of all, he says to himself ***“God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees.”*** And if there was justice in the universe, you might think, then God would send fire from heaven immediately to destroy this person. But no. Not only does he live on, but he prospers, v5. He says to himself, v6, ***“Nothing will shake me; I'll always be happy and never have trouble.”*** Somehow, this person not only carries on living, but he manages to have a big house, a happy family, a good reputation and a big fat pension plan. Nothing ever really seems to harm him.

There are at least a couple of lessons for us to learn from this. One is that we shouldn't be surprised to see evil people prospering in the world around us. I look at someone like Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe, and it seems amazing how he goes on year after year. Everyone knows that he is a corrupt, wicked man. He is completely blatant in the ways that he has murdered and stolen and cheated and lied in order to stay in power, and the whole country is bleeding because of him. Yet year after year he goes on, a mile above any kind of justice, completely untouchable. This Psalm reminds us that **God has allowed this kind of evil for a while.** We should be outraged by men like Mugabe, but we shouldn't be surprised. Maybe you are suffering at the moment because of this kind of person. The workplace bully – charming, charismatic and well liked by all his superiors. But thoroughly dishonest, with absolutely no regard whatever for his colleagues and willing to tread on anyone in order to get to the top. Many workplaces have someone like that, and it can be infuriating to see how well they get on. But we mustn't become bitter. **God has allowed this kind of evil for a while.**

On the other hand, this Psalm also teaches us that just because my life is going well, it doesn't necessarily mean that God is pleased with me. It is easy to think that just because

outwardly I am prospering – perhaps my school work is going well and I am heading for top grades at GCSE or A level. Perhaps my career is going from strength to strength and I am now earning more money than most other people my age. Perhaps I have a wonderful family, and my children are top of the class at school, and I have a beautiful home in lovely Cambridgeshire. None of it means that God is necessarily pleased with me. There are plenty of thoroughly wicked people out there who are prospering far more than I am.

Perhaps we ought to ask ourselves the question, ‘do we ever say to ourselves “God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees”?’. What are the things you do in the darkness when God seems far away, and it doesn’t feel like he is watching you? What are the internet sites you look at? What are the films and TV programmes you watch? What are the things you talk about and gossip about when you’ve had slightly too much to drink? Don’t be fooled that just because your life is going well outwardly at the moment that God must be pleased with you. **God has allowed evil people like you and me to flourish for a while.** In the end it will only be those who are genuinely trusting in Jesus, and genuinely pursuing God’s righteousness that will be saved. **God allows evil for a while.**

Point 3 – God will bring justice in the end (v12-18)

Thankfully that isn’t the end of the story. In v12-18 David prays to God to act, and he comes out confidently that he believes that God is faithful and the books will all be balanced in the end. V16, **“The LORD is King for ever and ever; the nations will perish from his land.”** And v18b **“man, who is of the earth, will terrify no more.”** These are wonderful, triumphant statements that God will win in the end. The Robert Mugabe’s of this world will be brought to justice, they will never have the final say. We ought to rejoice and be glad that this kind of evil won’t be allowed to go on forever. Justice will be done in the end. David prays, v12, **“Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless.”** And v15, **“Break the arm of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out.”** He pleads with God to bring these kinds of people to justice, and to urgently help those who are suffering – which we assume includes himself at the moment.

And David reminds himself of the character of God. He reminds himself in v13-14 of how God really reacts to evil in this world: **“Why does the wicked man revile God? Why does he say to himself, ‘He won’t call me to account’? But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim comes to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.”** God does notice when people are suffering, he doesn’t ignore it, he comes to help. And fundamentally, it is those who are weak and suffering that God has a heart for. V17, **“You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed.”**

These verses ought to encourage us. If we’re suffering at the moment, then remember that God really does hear the desire of the afflicted, v17. Whatever you’re suffering, God really does care, and he will listen to your cry – it is always the best thing to do with all our sufferings, small and big, to turn them into prayers. God is a father to those who cry out to him, and will listen to your cry.

However there is a challenge for us too: God has a heart for the fatherless and the oppressed, do we have a heart for the fatherless and the oppressed? There are many fatherless and oppressed and afflicted people out there in the world. Are we on God's side in this one? Do we have a heart to help them? Does the way that we spend our time and our money reflect that we have a heart to want to help them? Or do we actually show that really we don't care? I think this is something that we need to think about. God is very aware of people suffering in this world. If we shut our eyes to it, which is very easy to do when our lives are cosy and nice and happy, then we will find ourselves badly out of step with God.

However there is an even more important issue at stake here. When David prays, v15, "Break the arm of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out", really that is a prayer about each and every one of us. The Bible is clear that none of us is good, because all of us have refused to give God the place that he deserves at the centre of our lives. We ought to tremble when we read that prayer in v15, because if God answered it absolutely rigorously, then all of us would face his anger. When we look at evil in the world and we ask God to break the arm of the wicked, we mustn't ever forget the evil that there is in our own hearts. It is only because the Lord Jesus has paid the price for us – when the nails were driven into his hands on the cross, it is as if he were answering the prayer of v15 on our behalf. Only because he was called to account for our wickedness can we have hope. And only if we come to him and trust in him and make him our best friend can we be confident.

Yet if we have done that. If we have really come to Jesus, then we can read this Psalm with confidence and joy. V18, "**Man who is of the earth, may terrify no more.**" In the new creation, no one will be terrified. No more injustice, no more corruption, no more fatherless and oppressed and afflicted. No one will ever again feel the need to pray v1 "**why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble.**" Instead the song that all of us will sing will be v16, "**the LORD is king forever and ever.**"

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)