

April 21, 2024

A PRAYER TO THE JUDGE OF THE EARTH

Psalm 94

(2 of 5 in a series of selected Psalms)

On Christmas Eve this past year in the village of Lunghai, believers there were preparing to celebrate the birth of their Lord the next day when gunfire suddenly broke out. People immediately panicked, with parents running to protect their children and others running for their homes. Ezekiel Rigat responded much differently, however. He decided that even in the midst of the attack, he would pray. He walked over to the church building with his Bible in hand and began to pray.

I wish I could tell you that this story ended well, with the gunfire dying down, miraculously no one dying, or something along those lines. But it didn't. An eye-witness reported that terrorists entered the church building, began destroying everything, and dragged the pastor to an area and beat him severely. And it didn't stop there. After beating him and leaving him there in the middle of the building, they set the church building on fire with him still inside. After the attack was over, that eye-witness went in to find the pastor's dead body, with his hands still clutching his Bible.¹

You may well be aware that this is simply one of literally thousands of stories that could be told of believers in Nigeria becoming martyrs. A report that came out in April of 2023 reported that over 52,000 believers in Nigeria had been martyred in the previous fourteen years. That's an average of ten believers every day being killed over that fourteen year stretch. And that's simply the numbers for Nigeria. We could compound such reports if we considered the rest of the world over the last decade and a half.

I'm sure I don't have to tell you that we live in a world full of injustice. These kinds of stories may feel out of place in comparison to our own experiences, but they are not out of place in the world, and they are certainly not out of place in the history of the church. The grace we've been shown the last couple of centuries as believers in this country is exceptional. But we've noted many times that we have no promise it will continue and every reason—along with many signs—to expect that it won't.

So what do we do when we find ourselves in the midst of such injustices? What do we do when we or those whom we love are the objects of attack, suffering at the hands of wicked and violent men around us? It is good for us to ask and answer these questions now, while things are somewhat calm, because it's hard to get your bearings when you find yourself in the midst of dark and turbulent times. And the great thing for us is that Psalm 94 gives us the answer. It

¹ <https://globalchristianrelief.org/christian-persecution/stories/persecuted-believer-from-nigeria-prayed-through-gunfire/>. Accessed on April 15, 2024.

provides for us a guide, an example, for what we should do in times when injustices are mounting against us or other believers. So, I want for us is to listen to this in two ways. First, take note because there are all kinds of injustices that we may face daily, even if they don't register in the "severe" category, so we may need to follow the example of this psalm frequently. After all, we all no doubt have a taste—no matter how small in comparison to others it may feel to us—of injustice committed against us. Second, take in this psalm and hide it away in your heart because the day may come where you need to draw on it more than you do now. With that said, then, what does this psalm tell us about how to navigate those moments when injustice is all around us? In short, it tells us that in the midst of injustice, we can cry for God to intervene with justice.

In the midst of injustice, we can cry for God to intervene with justice

The psalmist begins by crying out to the Lord to intervene and judge, to show himself in bringing forth vengeance against his enemies. He writes, "O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve!" (vv. 1-2). He refers to him as the God of vengeance and judge of the earth, asking him to bring forth vengeance and to bring forth justice in the form of retribution, giving the wicked what they deserve. And my guess is that we might feel uncomfortable with this. After all, probably few, if any, of us spent our devotional times this week praying for God to give someone the punishment they deserve. So, what do we do with this? Well, let me note two things. First, the psalmist is entrusting himself and the situation around him to the Lord.

Here's what I mean. The psalmist isn't becoming a vigilante. That is, he's not saying, "I see wickedness being done, and I'm going to go punish them. They're about to get what they deserve from my hands!" And it's good he's not doing this. Paul would later write in Romans 12:17-19, "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" So, the psalmist recognizes that he shouldn't seek to avenge or repay evil with evil. Rather, he's trusting the Lord—the God who says, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay"—and he's asking him to do just that. With this request, he's showing his willingness to put this matter solely in the Lord's hands. This is an act of faith from the psalmist, reflecting that he believes God is who he says he is—the holy and righteous judge. That's one reason the request of verses 1-2 should not make us uncomfortable.

But there's a second element we should note if this request makes us feel uncomfortable. Recognize the reason the psalmist is asking God to intervene and bring vengeance. The psalmist writes in verses 3-7, "O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage. They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless; and they say, 'The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive.'"

He's not praying for God to bring vengeance just because he finds his neighbor annoying or the like. He speaks of these wicked men killing the widow, sojourner, and orphan. That is, they're targeting those who have no protections—whether from family or government. And they're rejoicing in what they're doing and being arrogant about it. They crush and afflict God's people, all the while, claiming that God does not see what they're doing and will do nothing about it.

It's easy, perhaps, to say, "I can't imagine myself praying what the psalmist prays in verses 1-2," but if you're witnessing what he's describing in verses 3-7, my guess is that you certainly would. And you certainly should. When we witness great injustice, we don't take vengeance into our hands, but we do (and should) cry out to the Lord, asking God to intervene and put a stop to the evildoer, for the sake of his name and the good of his people.

If we found people slaughtering children in our back yard, we could (and should) pray this way, asking God to intervene and put a stop to this violence. This is how can and should pray when we see great injustice now. In fact, this needs to be how we pray concerning the attacks that our brothers and sisters are facing in Nigeria. To pray this way shows that we're trusting the Lord and that we need him to interact.

One quick caveat. We don't pray this way at the expense of praying for revival or the sort. Certainly one way the Lord could intervene in Nigeria, for example, is for the gospel to run through that area like a wild fire and those who are terrorizing to repent and believe in the crucified and risen Lord. And if they do, this won't be at the expense of justice. Rather, Jesus will have born the punishment on the cross that these men deserved—even as he did for us. So, we do not pray for God to intervene and bring justice where there is injustice at the expense of praying for conversions, but it is indeed good and right to pray as the psalmist does here as well.

So, the psalmist shows us how we should pray in the midst of injustice, and then he spends the rest of the psalm telling us why we should find great encouragement and hope as we pray for God to bring justice in the midst of injustice. These are three truths we need to hold to in faith as we pray. The first is that God sees and takes note of everything going on.

God sees and takes note of everything going on

The last thing the psalmist mentioned in verses 1-7 is that the wicked men were claiming that God did not see or perceive what they were doing. He wasn't taking note of their evil actions. But the psalmist responds to that idea in verses 8-11, saying, "Understand, O dullest of people! Fools, when will you be wise? He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see? He who disciplines the nations, does he not rebuke? He who teaches man knowledge—the LORD—knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath."

The psalmist challenges the wicked men through a series of questions that are meant to reveal the foolishness of their thinking. Do you really think that if God invented ears he can't hear? Do you really think that the one who formed the eye can't see? Do you think that the one who brings down entire nations does nothing to rebuke a man when he does evil? Do you think the

one who gives us the ability to think doesn't know our thoughts? These are rhetorical questions, in which we're supposed to understand that the answer is: "Of course he does."

This should be an encouragement as we pray for God to intervene in the midst of injustice. Our God is taking note of what's going on. He's not missing any detail. No one of his saints is lost in Nigeria or any other part of the world apart from his oversight. He sees and knows every scheme that wicked men plan every second. It may well be that no one knows what, humanly speaking, what one is suffering except the individual and the perpetrator of the injustice itself, but God knows. God sees. And he's taking note. This is one reason we pray for God to intervene and bring justice, because we know that he sees and takes note of every single ounce of injustice.

But, if we're honest, that's really not comforting if it stops there. I mean, we've all heard stories where someone saw an injustice happening, was completely aware of what was going on, and did nothing. In those cases, the person's knowledge of the situation only made it worse. Were they *not* to see it, their inactivity wouldn't hurt as much. But to see it and do nothing is painful for us to consider. That's why the psalmist also tells us a second reason that we can pray in hope that God would intervene and bring justice, namely, God will not abandon or forget his people.

God will not abandon or forget his people

In verses 12-15 the psalmist begins to speak of the blessings that come to God's people. He writes, "Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law, to give him rest from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked. For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage; for justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it."

Now, when the psalmist speaks of the Lord disciplining his people in verse 12, he's not meaning corrective discipline, such as when one is sinning and the Lord disciplines in order to bring that person to repentance. He's talking about formative discipline, that is, the kind of formation that comes through difficult times. Think, for example, about Paul telling the Corinthians that he went through such difficulty that he despaired of life itself. Then he added, "But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:9). In other words, Paul was telling them that this difficult (indeed, extremely difficult) time he faced was used by the Lord to teach Paul, instruct him, and form him, making him rely on the Lord more. It was formative discipline. That's what the psalmist means by "discipline," and it's why he parallels it with "teach" in the second phrase of verse 12. It's a discipline of going through difficulties that forms us.

But we're not just the objects of his formative discipline, we're also the gracious recipients of what God has revealed in his Word. That's why the psalmist notes that those who belong to the Lord are not only those whom he disciplines but those whom he teaches from his law. And what we know of God and how he works with us, gives us a calmness, a relief, a certain kind of rest, even in the days of trouble, until we are delivered from it (v. 13). Specifically we can read his

Word right here in verses 14-15 and be reminded that the Lord is committed to us and won't abandon or forsake us as his people, promising to one day bring about justice. Therefore, we can say in any moment of suffering we can say that the Lord is using this to form us, that this isn't a sign that he has abandoned or forsake us, and that he will ultimately bring about justice. And knowing this should give us peace and hope, even in the midst of great injustice.

Now, remember last week as we looked at Psalm 92, and I noted that the psalmist named a time when he was blessed personally, and then he generalized it to say that what God did with him is how God deals with all his people? Well, now the psalmist does the opposite. After saying in verses 12-15 that God blesses his people, using their struggles to form and shape them, revealing truth to them along the way so that they have peace, even as they await the day that justice will come to them, he speaks of a time this happened with him personally in verses 16-19.

He writes, "Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against the evildoers? If the LORD had not been my help, my soul would have lived in the land of silence. When I thought, 'My foot slips,' your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up. When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul."

There was a time when the psalmist was under attack and thought he might die. That's what he means by "lived in the land of silence." He looked around and saw no one coming to his aid. He was tempted to doubt, his foot almost slipping, and then the Lord sustained him and delivered him. The Lord cheered up his soul by showing his care and protection. And again, the psalmist's point is that just as the Lord cared for him and upheld him in his time of adversity or suffering of injustice, so he does for all of his people. He does not abandon us. He does not forsake us. He is committed to us. He will uphold us. And he will give us peace.

One reason we cry out to the Lord in the midst of injustice is because we know that God sees and knows all. But we can also add that he not only sees and knows all but is committed to us. He will be with us and will sustain us through whatever we face until he brings us safely to himself. He will never abandon us or forsake us.

So, let me make this personal. You may feel like you're going through a time of adversity and suffering and struggle, and you're feeling like it's going to overtake you. But the Lord sees and knows. Not one detail of your struggle is missed by him. He knows what has happened, and he knows every detail of how it affects you. And he cares about you. He loves you. He'll not abandon you or forget you through this. He knows exactly what he's doing. He'll even use this to form and shape you, and in the meanwhile, he wants to give you rest from your days of trouble—even in the midst of them. He wants to give you relief and peace. So cry out to him for help, trust him, and rest in him. He cares for you more than you can imagine. But it doesn't stop there. There is one other reason we can cry out to the Lord in the midst of injustice with great hope. God will one day make everything right.

God will one day make everything right

In the last stanza of the psalm, the psalmist asks whether the actions of the wicked can co-exist with the reign of the holy God. He writes, "Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who frame injustice by statute? They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death" (vv. 20-21). And then he answers, "But the LORD has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge. He will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the LORD our God will wipe them out" (vv. 22-23).

In other words, the psalmist is saying that the answer is, "No." Injustice will not prevail. It will not linger forever. In the end, God will make everything right. It may look like the wrong side is prevailing in Nigeria, but our Lord knows and sees. He hears the prayers of his people. He heard the word of his child who burned to death in that church building. He's heard the cries of the over 52,000 whose blood has been shed over the last fourteen years. And he's seen every atrocity. He's heard every word the wicked have uttered. He's seen and taken note of their arrogant attitude and their rejoicing over evil. And it may feel like they're prevailing, but God does not abandon his people. He does not forsake them. He will vindicate them. He will judge the earth and give the wicked what they deserve.

And he will make everything right in your life as well. One day you'll see his wisdom in everything that has come about. One day you'll give praise and thanks for the wisdom of God in those things that bring so many questions and pain to your heart now. You'll see that he never abandoned you, always loved you, and was using everything to form you into conformity to his Son. He will balance the books. And so we pray and keep praying. We cry out to our Lord in the midst of injustice, and we know that he hears and will answer us. It may be by bringing justice in this age. It may be by bringing justice in the age to come. But if it is the latter, he can bring peace in the midst of trouble, reminding you that he gave his Son to make you his precious, forgiven child.

I've mentioned this before, but the book of Revelation is written to a suffering people. The Lord tells some of them in the midst of tribulation, "Be faithful unto death" (Rev 2:10). He keeps reminding them that though it looks like they're losing, they're conquering and will receive the crown of life. But for our purposes, let's remember the scene of Revelation 8. After the opening of seal after seal and the martyrs being told to wait because more were to shed their blood for Jesus' sake, we have the opening of the seventh seal, and all of heaven is silenced. Indeed, it's silenced for half an hour. Why? Because an angel was bringing the prayers of the saints before the Lord, and these are precious to our God (Rev 8:1-5). So, let's cry out to our God in the midst of every injustice, and let's give him thanks now that he hears and will not abandon us as we come to the table. Amen.