

The Poetry of Divine Justice

Psalm 64

Psalm 64 begins with lament and ends in rejoicing, but it is rejoicing brought about by the wonder of divine retribution and salvation.

The movement in the psalms from lament to joy is itself prophetic. It finds its ultimate fulfillment in the coming of King Jesus to put down all evil and judge the world righteously. All those who struggle with the reality of evil, if consistent, should rejoice in Jesus. He is the only answer.

The movement in the psalms from lament to joy is always through the judgment of God, setting things right. That movement is a reversal brought about by God saving his people.

Of all the views of God's judgment in Scripture—the flood and the conquest—the most colorful view is the divine reversal. It is poetic justice. It is dramatic. It makes judgment obvious for all to see.

Two narrative examples come to mind. **First**, Haman, in the time of Queen Esther. Haman was a man who could not receive enough honor to satisfy his empty soul. It did not matter that everyone bowed to him, it was that one man, Mordecai did not. He became so distressed and obsessed with Mordecai that he hatched a plot to annihilate all the Jews and, at the suggestion of his wife and friends, built a gallows 75 feet tall from which to hang Mordecai (Est 5:14).

On the third day, Esther approached the king to request that he and Haman come to a feast prepared in their honor (Es. 5:1). That night the king could not sleep, so he had the book of remembrance read, which reminded him of the time Mordecai had uncovered a plot to assassinate the king (Es 6:1-2).

Just at that time, Haman entered the palace court to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows. Before he could speak, the king asked Haman, *What should be done to the man the king delights to honor* (Es 6:6)? Haman could not imagine any man the king would want to honor other than him (Es 6:6). So, he came up with an elaborate ordeal to honor the man that he imagined to be himself. The king said, *“Hurry ... and do so to Mordecai the Jew....”* (Es 6:10).

At the feast Esther prepared for the king and Haman, she revealed Haman's plot to kill her and all the Jews (Es 7:1-6). The king ordered Haman to be hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai (Es 7:10).

When I read that story, I wonder if Haman appreciated the sheer of poetry of his end? That his own plans were turned on him? Did he realize he was being justly hanged on the gallows he unjustly built for another? Nevertheless, in one and the same act, God worked to judge Haman and save the Jews.

Daniel in the lion's den is **another narrative3 example** of retributive judgment. Knowing Daniel was a man of prayer, his enemies approached the king, under the auspices of loyalty to the king, suggesting that anyone who bowed to a god other than the king for a period of 30 days should be cast into the den of lions. Darius signed their proposal into the irrevocable law of the Medes and the Persians.

Daniel, knowing the law, went home, opened his windows facing Jerusalem, and bowed down and prayed 3 times a day. The high officials and satraps accused Daniel before the king. Under pressure, the king commanded that Daniel be cast into the den of lions, saying to Daniel, *May your God, whom you serve continually, deliver you!* (Dan 7:16).

God delivered Daniel by shutting the mouths of the lions (Dan 7:21). Then the king ordered that those who had maliciously accused Daniel be cast into the den of lions, along with their children and their wives (Dan 7:24).

Again, I wonder if Daniel's enemies realized and fully appreciated that the end they had planned for Daniel was their own end?

Dear friend, do you see that when people think they are closest to achieving their secret, evil plans, they are nearest to the judgment of God?ⁱ God will preserve his people. While the examples of Haman and Daniel are narrative accounts of the divine reversal theme, Psalm 64 is the poetic presentation of that theme.

The psalm has 3 section: in verses 1-6 the psalmist voices his lament (1-2) and gives a detailed description of the enemy (3-6); Verses 7-9 tell of God's poetic judgment (7-8a) and people's response (8b-9); Verse 10 shows how through judgment the lament of the psalmist turned to joy.ⁱⁱ

In this sermon, I would like to do **two things**. **First**, I want to encourage weary to take refuge in God (10b) because he is going to turn things around. **Second**, I want to warn the evil man or those who are hoping to keep their evil secret to case yourself on God's mercy.

1. In this world, we are going to have trouble (1-6)

In these verses, we hear the psalmist's lament, along with a detailed description of his enemy.

A. His complaint (1-2)

In verses 1-2, the psalmist launched his *complaint*. His complaint was not murmuring or whining, but the expression of his troubled mind.

In his complaint, he wants God to *hear* (1a) and to *act* (1b-2).

The psalmist felt blindsided by the attack of the enemy. He complained, *I was ambushed* (4a). It doesn't seem fair.

Lament is God's gift of comfort to us in this world of trouble. Too often, we may be prone to think that trials are odd, or we are being singled out and punished. It is odd that we think trials are odd, when Peter said, *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you* (1Pet 4:12). He also said of the devil attacking believers, *the same kinds of suffering are being experienced by your brotherhood throughout the world* (1Pet 5:9).

He suggested **two actions** God might take: ***Preserve*** him (1b) and ***hide*** him (2a).

First, he wants God to guard or keep his life from the *dread* of his enemies (1b). He is as concerned about his *fear* as he is about his enemies. He simply hated that the enemies' attack excited dread in him.

In his first inaugural address in 1933, as the nation was in the depths of the Great Depression, FDR famously said, *We have nothing to fear but fear itself*. The reality is we may have a little more to fear than fear, but the point is well taken. Fear can be paralyzing, lead us to make bad decisions, and be unbearably torturous. You walk around just waiting for the hammer to fall. Ultimately, fear robs us of faith and joy.

The psalmist is praying, *let me deal faithfully with this situation without fear*. We need to pray as much about our fear as we do about our enemies.

Second, he asked God to *hide* him from the secret plots that stir up mobs of evildoers (2). He wanted God to hide him from what was hidden. The *evildoers* were being steered by those who were plotting in secret. The situation was like the chief priests and the elders who primed the crowd to demand the crucifixion of Jesus (Mt. 27:20). They were working behind the scenes to turn public opinion.

B. Description of the enemy (3-6)

In verses 3-6, he launched into a sustained description of the *wicked* who were plotting secretly against him. The psalmist described their mode of attack and, then, their planning process.

First, their mode of attack. Their *words* (debar) are like *sharp swords* and *poisonous arrows* (3). They attacked with words—rumors, innuendo, and lies—calculated to do the most harm.

Almost every word of verse 4 is repeated elsewhere in the psalm. At the most opportune time, they fired their words from *hiding*, *suddenly*, and *without fear* (4). The irony is they were attacking a *blameless* man. He had given no cause for the attack.

Second, he moves from describing the enemies' mode of attack, to describing their internal planning operation (5-6). It makes you wonder how the psalmist knew these internal details? Did God reveal it? Did he have a spy? Did he simply know how evil people operate? Or was he imagining what they might be thinking, expressing his troubles thoughts to God (cf 1)?

They hold tightly to their *purpose* (5a, cf. 3, debar = word); they talk among themselves of their *perfectly laid snares* (5b); they think, *who can see them* (5c)?

Next, the psalmist highlights how carefully they planned (6). They *search out injustice* to do it, and then, admire the *perfection of their search*. The words *blameless* (4), *laying* (5), and *accomplishing* (6) all share the same root.ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, they attacked an innocent man with what they felt was the perfect plan perfectly executed.

A lack of confidence was not their problem.

Have you ever thought about the plans of evil men and wondered *why*? What was Thomas Crooks in Butler, PA, thinking when he took a shot at the President or Tyler Robinson when he murdered Charlie Kirk or a group of kids in a park who coldly shoot into a crowd? The conclusion of the psalmist is, *For the inward mind and heart of a man are deep* (6c).

We cannot understand the inward process of reasoning that plans and carries out evil. Understanding *why* would be no consolation to us. What if they are just evil?

Jeremiah took up this thought: *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? "I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds"* (Jer 17:9-10).

Know this, in this world we will have trouble and be unjustly attacked. God, however, searches hearts, weighs motives, and will perfectly answer every evil. This brings us to the second point.

2. God will answer every attack of the enemy (7-9)

The verbs of verses 7-9 are translated as present, past, and future tenses.^{iv} The sense of the verbs is to give a cause and result effect to show God answers every evil deed.

In verse 7, when God *shoots*, they are *wounded*. In verse 8, when they are *brought to ruin* and their own words are turned against them, all who see will *wag* their heads (per). In verse 9, when all mankind *fears* and *tells* what God has brought about (in verses 7-8), they will *ponder* what God has done.

The psalm takes a dramatic turn in verse 7 with the words, *but God*. Those words change everything. It's instructive to trace those words through the Bible. They mark divine reversals, God overturning certain death to save his people.

A. The reversal (7-8)

In the flood story, we read, *And the waters prevailed on the earth. **But** God remembered Noah...* (Gen 7:24-8:1).

In the Joseph story, Joseph said to his brothers, *As for you, you meant evil against me, **but** God meant it for good* (Gen 50:20).

Those reversals are meant to give us hope. They show us how God works to save his people. They point to the reversal to end all reversals, God's defeat of sin, death, and Satan.

You can see this when Peter preached in the temple, saying to the men of Israel, *You killed the Author of life, **but** God raised him from the dead* (Acts 3:15).

The death and resurrection of Christ changed everything for us. Paul wrote, *And you were dead in trespasses and sins in which you once walked...**but** God... made us alive together with Christ...* (Eph 2:1,4,5).

So thoroughly did Jesus overturn death in his resurrection that he secured the resurrection of our bodies as well: *The sting of death is sin, and power of sin is the law. **But** thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ* (1Cor 15:56-57).

The perfection plans of the evildoers failed to consider God. They did not account for God. God was a non-factor. Yet, towering over all their plans was God. It seems that was a huge oversight.

What if there is a God? That is a clarifying consideration for those plotting evil.

Starting in verse 7, God overturned the verdict of evildoers. He answered in poetic fashion every evil deed of the enemy. Not one is left unanswered.

- They aim bitter words like arrows and *shoot* (3b-4a), but God *shoots* his arrow at them (7a).
- They shoot from ambush *suddenly* (4a-b), but God wounds them *suddenly* (7b).
- They sharpen their *tongues* like swords (3a), but their own *tongues* turn against them (8b)

- They think no *one can see* their secret snares (5c), yet *everyone will see* their downfall (8c).
- They attack *without fear* (4b), but in the end *all will fear* God (9a).
- The enemies are *evildoers* (pa'al 'aven) operating in secret (2), but in the end all will *tell what God has done* (po'al 'elohim, 9b).
- Their *hearts* are desperately wicked (6c), but the upright in *heart* will exult (10c).
- The *dread* of the enemy (1b) is replaced by *rejoicing* in the LORD (10a).

These verses show how God poetically answers every evil deed. They think their evil deeds are hidden from sight (5c), but omniscience is completely informed. God does not lack information. He, therefore, judges perfectly.

When I was young, mesmerized by the world and my newfound freedom as an older teen, I struggled to consider God. Life was exciting. I was preoccupied and unteachable. Dear friend, now I fear the Lord in everything. I've seen the poetic justice of God at work in world. And I am the recipient of extravagant grace.

It may seem like to you that people get away with sin, or you are getting away sin, but let me assure you no one gets away with anything. God poetically answers every evil deed. You are no exception

When God shoots his arrow, they are wounded, their own words condemn them, their secret sins are laid bare for all to see (7-8).

Listen to the exhortation of Scripture, *Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy* (Pr 28:13).

B. The result

Ultimately, God will overturn evil in a spectacular fashion. When he does, all will fear. Perhaps, for the first time, People will see the hidden plots of the wicked exposed. It will cause them to *wag* their heads in astonishment (8b) and be gripped by *fear* (9a).

Plot twists can be astonishing. In the movie, *The Sixth Sense*, when Cole, a 9 year old boy, says, *I see dead people*, at that moment and not before, we realize Cole's father, Malcolm Crowe, played by Bruce Willis, had been dead all along. It's not

until that moment that we can see how that plot had been slowly progressively revealed all along.

God is at work in the world guiding the plot behind the scenes. Occasionally, we get a glimpse of his hand at work. But a moment is coming when the world will see clearly the plot twist of history God has instored. All will be astonished (8c).

When the secret deeds of evildoers are exposed (2), *fear* will overcome all mankind, and they will *tell* what God has done (9b) to bring about the poetry of justice. All will *ponder* the poetic reality of divine justice (9c).

God will answer every evil deed.

3. The conclusion for the believer is joy (10)

The only way to unending gladness is through God's righteous judgment putting an end to evil.

The flow of this psalm from lament to rejoicing is instructive. The psalm begins with lament. God's gift of lament lets us know that he knows and cares. He desires to hear our troubles. Peter said, *Humble yourselves, therefore under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you* (1Pet 5:6-7). Lament is humbling ourselves under his mighty hand.

We are not in heaven yet, so don't expect life to be trouble free, but expect God to comfort and sustain you, knowing that he will set right every wrong. He will set things right much better than you can. He will do so perfectly and poetically.

We hear a lot of talk about justice. All our ideas of justice are lacking. They are tainted by human sin. It's good and right to strive for justice, but because of the impact of sin on our minds and hearts, we don't know what justice is. God, however, knows what justice is because he is justice and cannot be or do anything that is unjust. He is perfect justice and will answer every evil deed.

This is why, on the one hand, Scripture tell us, *leave wrath to God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord"* (Rom 12:19).

And why, on the other hand, we exhort people to flee to Christ for mercy. Christ bore the just wrath of God, *that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus* (Rom 3:26).

Without God setting all wrongs right, there can be no rejoicing of the people of God. Do you see how essential it is for the Lord to right all wrongs for joy to ultimately be genuine? As long as evil and evil people are in the world, there will be lament.

When, however, God sets things right, the *righteous one [will] rejoice* and the *upright in heart [will] exult* as they find *refuge* in the LORD. Even the prospect of that day gives us reason to rejoice.

ⁱ Allen Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms*, vol 2, 401

ⁱⁱ Goldingay, *Psalms 42-89* in BCOT:Wisdom and Psalms; Christopher Ash outlines the psalm in this way as well.

ⁱⁱⁱ Blameless = tam; laying = taman; accomplished = tamam.

^{iv} The Hebrew verbs are imperfect, showing ongoing, incomplete action; followed by perfects, showing completed action. This produces a cause and result effect.