

Psalm 94 “Vengeance Is Mine, Says the Lord”
Psalm 94
Romans 12

November 19, 2017

One of the challenges of preaching through the whole Bible
is that there are parts of the Bible
that do not fit comfortably with our modern ways of thinking!

And it would be fairly easy to avoid those parts of the Bible and just preach on the “good parts.”
But this is also one of the benefits of preaching through the whole Bible!
It forces us to deal with the whole of what God tells us about himself.

But if you have ever had to deal with powerful people who used their power to destroy and harm,
then you need songs like Psalm 94.

Psalm 94 fits very uncomfortably with modern ways of *thinking* –
but it is very appropriate for modern *reality*!

Indeed, as we will see, it fits our situation today with an uncanny accuracy.

Sing Psalm 94
Read Romans 12

Do you struggle with a desire for revenge?
When someone does something wrong to you,
do you want to “get even”?
Does the thought, “he’ll pay for that” ever cross your mind?

“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”
The one who *actually* believes this
is the only one who can live a life free from vengeance.
If you are confident that *God will make everything right*,
then you can live your life peaceably with everyone
(at least as far as it depends on you!).

Do you believe that God does avenge?
I’m not talking about the petty things that bother us.
God is not petty.

Let’s take the example used in our Psalm:
“they kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless.”

Let’s say that there is a powerful man who uses his position and status
to murder a helpless orphan and take the orphan’s inheritance for himself.
Will God do anything about that?

Yes!

God will *not* let that slide!

When those in power use their power to afflict the helpless

God will bring justice –
he will *avenge* the weak!

But we need to recognize that Psalm 94 is *not* just talking about a particular instance of injustice.

Psalm 94 is talking about *social structures* of injustice.

Psalm 94 is talking about how rulers have established a political-economic system
in which the widow, the sojourner, and the orphan
are helpless against those who would mistreat them.

(Notice verse 20 – “those who frame injustice by statute”).

In other words, those who are in control have established unjust structures.

After all, Psalm 94 is situated in Book 4 of the Psalter –
in the context of the exile – or shortly thereafter –
where there is no Son of David sitting on the throne.

Judah lives under Babylonian or Persian rule.

But Psalm 94 is not really talking about the distant rulers in Babylon.

The problem is right here in our town.

The problem is that “Babylon” has come to characterize Jerusalem.

And that’s why the song starts with a complaint to God.

This is where we *must* start!

1. The Complaint to God: How Long Will the Wicked Win? (v1-7)

O LORD, God of vengeance,

O God of vengeance, shine forth!

God is a God of vengeance.

Because the whole point of vengeance
is to make something right that was wrong.

The *problem* with *our* vengeance
is that we have such a short vision of our situation.

And so we ask God:

² *Rise up, O judge of the earth;
repay to the proud what they deserve!*

³ *O LORD, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked exult?*

⁴ *They pour out their arrogant words;*

all the evildoers boast.
⁵ *They crush your people, O LORD,
and afflict your heritage.*
⁶ *They kill the widow and the sojourner,
and murder the fatherless;*
⁷ *and they say, "The LORD does not see;
the God of Jacob does not perceive."*

In verse 5, we hear that the wicked “crush” your people.
It is the same word used in Psalm 93:3 to refer to the roaring floods.
The wicked are like the crashing seas that crush your people –
and so we cry out to the LORD who is mighty to save!

It is *right* to bring a complaint to God!
When things are messed up – it is right to say, “God,
when are you going to do something about this?!”

But then the Psalmist turns to the fools and rebukes them.

2. The Rebuke to the Fool: Do Not Underestimate God (v8-11)

⁸ *Understand, O dullest of the people!*
Fools, when will you be wise?
⁹ *He who planted the ear, does he not hear?*
He who formed the eye, does he not see?

The fool says in his heart, “there is no God.” (Ps 14/53)
That could mean outright atheism.
But more common are those who think that even if there is a god,
he does not pay attention to daily life.

Augustine puts it this way:
“With worldly, materialistic people, what they are in the habit of observing
entirely governs their manner of understanding.” (Augustine, 182)

We sometimes like to think that “things have gotten worse” –
or “things are so much better!”

But when you consider Psalm 94 – or for that matter, Augustine! –
you begin to realize that worldly people have *always* been around!

There have always been those who claim that the world simply runs along as it always has.
People who do bad things don’t get caught –
usually they get away with it!

So what’s the big deal?

Everyone does it!!

Where have we been hearing these words?
Everyone does it!
It's no big deal!

Can you imagine how many Congressmen and Senators right now are squirming!
They know how many women out there could ruin their careers!
(And I'm just referring to the ones that are guilty!!)
I've talked to enough former congressional assistants to have heard the line,
"Everyone does it..."

In my day we called it "peer pressure."

But it doesn't matter if "everyone does it" –
if *God* says "don't do it" – then don't do it!!

Sure, for the moment, you may get away with it –
but you never know when (or how) God will bring judgment!

Let me say this very clearly:
this cultural moment – where sexual harassment has become the focus of attention –
is God's own judgment against the sexual perversion of our culture!
I realize the irony!
Because it's not like our culture has become so sexually wholesome!!

Rather it is a form of poetic justice – as we'll see later in our passage.
But that's the way God does things!
God has a habit of bringing sin back upon itself in judgment.

You might be tempted to say that our culture cares nothing about God's law –
and that is largely true –
but then again, neither did Babylon or Persia –
yet both became instruments of God's judgment!
(only to do wicked deeds to others, and thereby fall under God's judgment themselves!!)

My point is this:
since you never know when the culture will shift –
since you never know when something that was "okay" – "everyone does it" –
will suddenly become "not okay" – "what an evil person you are!" –
the prudent thing to do is to stop paying attention to what "everyone does"
and base your actions upon what *Jesus* says you are to do!

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your strength,
and love you neighbor as yourself.

You may suffer for doing the right thing.

Jesus did!

So I'm not promising that if you do the right thing – you'll never suffer for it!
But the apostle Peter tells us that it is better to suffer for doing the right thing –
than to suffer for doing evil.

Men, here's a very simple rule of thumb:
if she's not your wife, think of her as a sister.

If you wouldn't do it your sister, don't do it to your sister!
(or, for those who like to torment your sister! –
If your sister doesn't like it when you do it to her,
don't do it to any other women either!)

That's another way of saying, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

Our culture says that it's all about "consent."

But here's the problem!

Consent can be coerced.

And by "coerced" I don't mean "forced"!

If you are in a position of power – then the other person may not know how to say 'no.'

You might think that she's okay with it –
and then six months later (or 20 years later!), you find out that she wasn't!
And then your career is ruined.

It's not the consent of the other person that matters.

It's the consent of *God* that matters!

Because love for neighbor must always be rooted in love for *God*.

If God says that it is wrong – it doesn't matter what the other person thinks!

The wicked say "the LORD does not see."

The fool thinks that you can get away with stuff that other people don't see.

But God sees.

God hears.

He may not act immediately –
but he *will* act.

He will bring justice to rescue the weak.

What we are seeing right now is the vengeance of God against powerful men
who have misused their power to use women for their personal pleasure.

What do we mean when we say that God "sees" and "hears"?

Last week, we used Psalm 115 in our call to worship –
Psalm 115 says that the idols of the nations
“have mouths, but they do not speak;
eyes, but do not see.
They have ears, but do not hear;
noses, but do not smell...”

The God who made heaven and earth – the God who planted the ear,
does he not hear?

Indeed, he made us in his image – and gave us ears,
so that in *our* sense of hearing we would reflect him.
We hear *some things* –
because we are modeled after the God who hears *all things*.

Likewise, he who formed the eye, does he not see?
The God who sees all things *gave you eyes* so that you might reflect him.

We see *some things* –
because we are modeled after the God who sees *all things*.

And verse 10 brings us to the heart of what it means for God to see and hear:
“He who disciplines the nations, does he not rebuke?”

¹⁰ *He who disciplines the nations, does he not rebuke?*

God sees.
He hears.
But he also speaks.
He also acts.

He may wait longer than we would like!
But there is a pattern – a direction – a trajectory – in history.
And it is a pattern that is profoundly Christ-shaped.

And you see the beginnings of that Christ-shape in the knowledge that God teaches.

He who teaches man knowledge—
¹¹ *the LORD—knows the thoughts of man,*
that they are but a breath.

“The LORD knows the thoughts of man – that they are but a breath.”
In the book of Genesis, these two nouns are used as proper names.

Adam and Abel.

Adam is simply the Hebrew word for “man.”

Abel is simply the Hebrew word for “vapor” or “breath.”

Adam was the first man – who fell into sin.

Abel was his son – who was murdered by his brother Cain.

Already in the first generation after Adam, we have moved from sin to death –
as Cain strikes at the image of God and kills his brother.

The thoughts of man – the thoughts of Adam –
have become Abel – they have become a vapor –
they are transient and pass away.

Humanity has been reduced to hebel.

This is pretty much exactly the point of the book of Ecclesiastes!

“Hebel, hebel, everything is hebel.”

Everything ends in futility and death – just like Adam’s son, Abel.

And that is the central problem here in Psalm 94.

When the thoughts of Adam’s heirs are become Abel –

entirely futile – empty – “but a breath” –

then truly we have become the dullest of the people –
we have become fools.

And we *need* the LORD’s discipline:

Because it can be hard to wait “until a pit is dug for the wicked.”

3. The Blessing to the Upright: Justice for His People (v12-15)

¹² *Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD,*

and whom you teach out of your law,

¹³ *to give him rest from days of trouble,*

until a pit is dug for the wicked.

In our day, we tend to live such comfortable lives that we tend to cringe at this sort of language.

I want you to think about your brothers and sisters who lived under ISIS in Iraq or Syria.

Because the focus here is on a society that has broken down –
so that justice is not available.

That’s partly why I used the sexual abuse scandal as an illustration.

In the 1990s justice was not available.

If you were a woman in Washington – or Hollywood –

you knew that no one cared enough to do anything about it.

All you could do was wait “until a pit is dug for the wicked.”

But it's important to recognize that the Psalmist is talking about systemic problems – not just a minor difficulty between neighbors.
After all, if you have confidence in the righteousness of your community, then any difficulty between neighbors can be resolved.

But when the wicked rule –
you have no such confidence.

(Indeed, that is why I am more than a little nervous about the current situation, because both sides seem more than willing to use the current scandals in order to further their own power!)

What we have today is largely a matter of the wicked digging pits for the wicked – so all we know is that eventually *all of them* will fall into it!

And the righteous will probably suffer along with the wicked!

But that is why the blessing of verse 12 is so important!

¹² *Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD,
and whom you teach out of your law,
¹³ to give him rest from days of trouble,
until a pit is dug for the wicked.*

Again, this is the singular man –
the blessed man whom God teaches from his law (remember Psalm 1!).

And this connects with God's people (plural) in verses 14-15:

¹⁴ *For the LORD will not forsake his people;
he will not abandon his heritage;
¹⁵ for justice will return to the righteous,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.*

God's promise is justice for his people.

And you can see again the relationship between the singular man (verses 12-13), and the plural people (verses 14-15).

As we have seen regularly in Book 4,

the text gives us no clues as to the identity of this singular "man" – other than the fact that it follows the regular pattern of earlier Psalms – which made clear that the Son of David is the blessed man.

Therefore, we should continue to see the Son of David as the blessed Man – the one who receives the promises – the one whom God gives rest from days of trouble, until the final day of judgment.

In other words, we should see this as referring to the resurrection of Jesus!

In the resurrection of Jesus,
we see the Father glorifying his Son,
and exalting the Son of David to his right hand.

And therefore, in the resurrection of Jesus
we see the guarantee of the promise
that the LORD will not forsake his people.

God will not abandon his inheritance.

He has promised.

He is faithful.

And so we can be sure that 'justice will return to the righteous,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.' (v15)

If Jesus is who he says he is,
then we need to be who Jesus tells us to be!

We need to be a people characterized by justice and righteousness.

Justice and righteousness are largely synonyms –
but with a certain nuance:

Righteousness has to do with how a community is organized.

Justice has to do with the particular instance of putting righteousness into practice.

If Jesus has established his righteous community – the Kingdom of God –
then we should organize our communities –
our homes, our churches, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our cities –
according to the rule of Jesus.

The discipline of the Lord Jesus should guide and direct us.

All the upright in heart will follow the justice of the Kingdom.

And the justice of the Kingdom is set forth by our Lord Jesus in two basic commandments:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And love your neighbor as yourself.

Sure, the rest of scripture is useful and important for fleshing out the details –
but *all the law and the prophets* depend on those two commands!

Jesus himself tells you that you should interpret all the scriptures
in the light of those two commands.

So, for instance, the righteousness of the Kingdom

says that you should treat a woman with respect.

As Paul puts it, treat younger women as sisters – older women as mothers.

And then there is *one woman* that you may treat as your wife –

and that would be *your wife!*

4. The Testimony: The Steadfast Love of the LORD Is My Help (v16-19)

- ¹⁶ *Who rises up for me against the wicked?
Who stands up for me against evildoers?*
- ¹⁷ *If the LORD had not been my help,
my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.*
- ¹⁸ *When I thought, “My foot slips,”
your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up.*
- ¹⁹ *When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations cheer my soul.*

Verses 16-19 then bear witness to the steadfast love of the LORD.

Because in the midst of troubles – when I am surrounded by evildoers –
the LORD is my help.

Now, it is important to understand what a “helper” is!
We often think of a “helper” as an assistant –
someone who “helps” us do something that we could have done by ourselves.

That’s not what this is saying!
Think about it:
“if the LORD had not been my help,
my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.”
If the LORD was not my helper, I would be dead.

The word helper is used frequently of God in the Psalms.
In Genesis it is also used of Eve.
Why is Eve called a “helper”?
Not because she is an “assistant” –
but because she does something for Adam
that Adam could not possibly do for himself.
(God had said, “be fruitful and multiply” –
and Adam would *never* have been able to do that by himself!)

So, throughout Scripture, the *helper* is one who does for us
what we could not possibly have done for ourselves –

as the Psalmist says here, “if the LORD had not been my help,
my soul would have lived in the land of silence.”

We need to recognize that we are utterly dependent upon God.
In ourselves, we would slip and fall.

But again, we need to remember that this is the singular voice of the Davidic King.

This is the voice of our Lord Jesus.
After all, for our Lord Jesus, God was his helper!
 “Into your hands I commit my spirit” –
 and God did not suffer his flesh to corruption –
 but he raised him up from the dead and seated him in glory at his right hand!

The steadfast love of the LORD – God’s covenant faithfulness –
 was demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus.
And that is why *we* can have confidence – so that we can say *with Jesus* –
 “when the cares of my heart are many,
 your consolations cheer my soul.” (v19)

And then in verses 20-23 we have the Psalmist’s conclusion –
 a conclusion that reminds us that we are talking about rulers here –
 we are talking about an unjust society:

5. The Conclusion: Poetic Justice Is True Justice (v20-23)

²⁰ *Can wicked rulers be allied with you,
 those who frame^[b] injustice by statute?*
²¹ *They band together against the life of the righteous
 and condemn the innocent to death.*

In verse 20, the opening line is literally, “can the throne of iniquity have fellowship with you?”
 This connects back to Psalm 93:2,
 which spoke of God’s throne being established from of old.
 God’s throne is contrasted with the throne of the wicked –
 and there simply is no alliance possible between the throne of the wicked
 and the throne of God!

Yes, it is true that the Persians brought poetic justice against Babylon –
 and Cyrus allowed the people of God to go home and rebuild the temple!
Those are good things!

But we cannot say that therefore, there was fellowship between Persia and God!
 After the exile, Judah too often found themselves under the rule of the wicked.

²² *But the LORD has become my stronghold,
 and my God the rock of my refuge.*
²³ *He will bring back on them their iniquity
 and wipe them out for their wickedness;
 the LORD our God will wipe them out.*

We need to remember that poetic justice is true justice!

“He will bring back on them their iniquity.”

Many Psalms speak of this –
how those who dig a pit for others will fall into their own pit.
That’s the way that God judges.

With the measure that you use to judge others, you yourself will be judged.

We may not always understand how this works in this life,
but at the final day, we will see that the innocent will be vindicated –
the righteous will prevail –
and truth and justice will win the day.

Because, yes, there is such a thing as “the innocent” – or “the righteous.”
Sometimes we focus on Paul’s use of Psalm 14 –
“there is none righteous, no not one.”
And it is true that *before God* – *all* have sinned.
So in the sense of “sinlessness” – there is none righteous – no, not one.

But here in Psalm 94, the Psalmist is not talking about sinlessness.
The Psalmist is talking about a society that convicts the *innocent* –
and condemns them to death –
a society that bands together against those who do not deserve such treatment.

Sexual harassment – abortion – the disproportionate number of black men
who wind up with wrongful convictions on death row –

you can find a lot of reasons why our society would rightly be called to account.

And Jesus says that God will bring back on wicked rulers their iniquity.
I don’t mind naming names, where appropriate.
You can see a poetic justice in Hillary Clinton losing an election
to a man whose track record with women looks rather like her husband’s!
But that also means that a day of reckoning is coming on the other side as well!

Michiana Covenant needs to be a place where the Kingdom of Jesus comes *first*.
His righteousness comes *first*.
Don’t *ever think* that it’s okay to let powerful people get away with stuff.
If you are ever bothered by something that *I* am doing –
say something!
The church of Jesus Christ needs to be a place where the weak are protected,
where the innocent find comfort and vindication.

Of course, it is also important to say
that the church of Jesus Christ needs to be a place where *everyone* can repent!

Saul of Tarsus had used his power *to kill Christians* –
but he wound up becoming an apostle of Jesus Christ.

Saul of Tarsus was *wiped out* by God on the road to Damascus.
His life would never be the same again.

Because *that's what repentance means*.

For Saul of Tarsus, repentance meant that he *lost everything* that had mattered to him.
Repentance means that you lose everything – so that you can gain Christ!