

Is God an Absentee Father?

The Psalms

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This evening, brothers and sisters, I invite to turn with me in your Bibles to Psalm 10 in the Old Testament psalter. Psalm 10, our scripture reading and sermon texts for this evening. You'll find this on page 573 in your pew edition Bible. Psalm 10. The psalmist writes,

1 Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? 2 In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised. 3 For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the LORD. 4 In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are, "There is no God." 5 His ways prosper at all times; your judgments are on high, out of his sight; as for all his foes, he puffs at them. 6 He says in his heart, "I shall not be moved; throughout all generations I shall not meet adversity." 7 His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under his tongue are mischief and iniquity. 8 He sits in ambush in the villages; in hiding places he murders the innocent. His eyes stealthily watch for the helpless; 9 he lurks in ambush like a lion in his thicket; he lurks that he may seize the poor; he seizes the poor when he draws him into his net. 10 The helpless are crushed, sink down, and fall by his might. 11 He says in his heart, "God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it." 12 Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand; forget not the afflicted. 13 Why does the wicked renounce God and say in his heart, "You will not call to account"? 14 But you do see, for you note mischief and vexation, that you may take it into your hands; to you the helpless commits himself; you have been the helper of the fatherless. 15 Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer; call his wickedness to account till you find none. 16 The LORD is king forever and ever; the nations perish from his land. 17 O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted; you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear 18 to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more.

Thus far the reading of the word of the Lord. The grass withers and the flower fades but the word of our Lord endures forever.

Let's call upon the name of the Lord now in prayer.

Father, you have given us your word to be a lamp unto our feet and a light upon our pathway, and we are in need of your Spirit to understand these things and to benefit from the preaching of the word tonight, otherwise the words that I am about to speak simply fall upon deaf ears, and what is said from this pulpit is simply a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And so, Father, we ask for your Spirit to do his powerful and mysterious work in our hearts tonight. We pray especially from Psalm 10 that you would comfort the afflicted while at the same time afflicting the comfortable so that the name of Jesus Christ may be praised, that glory would be given to you, Father, that we would put our trust in your fatherly care and never doubt for a moment that your purposes will be fulfilled for the sake of Jesus Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.

Brothers and sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ, all of us, of course, love the doctrine of God's providence. It is precious to us. The words of Psalm 10 are beautiful, not so much a definition of providence but more of a poetic description of God's providence described in terms of God's fatherly hand. The language is meant to draw us to the intimacy of God's work in our lives. God numbers the hairs of our heads. He counts the stars of the sky at night. We can appreciate the work of his majesty throughout creation when we think of the complexity of the universe, the beauty, the grandeur of the created order, but there's also the element of God's providence as it relates to hardship and to suffering, not only to joy but to sorrow as well.

Think of the Catechism in its teaching about God's providence. We learn to be patients in terms of drought as well as rain, and lean years as well as fruitful, in sickness as well as in health, in poverty as well as in prosperity. All of these things we acknowledge, do we not, as mysterious as they may be, we acknowledge all of these things are appointed by God's hand, do we not? Do we not? But if we acknowledge this, it means that there are several challenges that we have to wrestle with, there are things in our lives that simply do not make sense at least on the surface. What do we do when it seems as though God is far removed from us, that he is absent from us? And I've entitled this evening's message "Is God An Absentee Father?" We speak of God as our Father, a loving, caring, powerful God, a God who is deeply concerned with us, but have you ever had the experience where you felt as if God was an absentee father? Now be honest. Have there been times where God seemed so far removed, distant, remote, or simply disinterested in what you're wrestling with? I'm sure there have been times where you have wrestled with that teaching as well.

Tonight we look at Psalm 10 and the specific challenge to God's fatherly providence, his care for us, is understood in terms of a very specific kind of problem. The question arises is God an absentee father in the context of the relationship between a predator and his prey. The psalmist here sees himself among those who are abused, those who are taking advantage of, those who are scoffed and ridiculed, and I want you to put yourself in that

situation tonight. I want you to think of a time in your life, maybe it's even right now, where you see yourself in the role of of praying, of someone who is subject to the abuse, to the mistreatment, the cruelty of a predator.

Some have suggested that to understand the fullness of the Psalm you should think of Psalm 10 in terms of four distinct voices or four distinct points of view of understanding this Psalm. Think of ancient Israel singing this Psalm, offering this Psalm in worship dealing with the nations that were hostile to them. They were surrounded by these. They had a history of enslavement, and later on we know they were taken captive by hostile nations. But then also think of this Psalm in terms of the perspective of Jesus Christ, think especially of him in Gethsemane, "Father, if it's possible let this cup pass from me." Think of him on the cross crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" And what he meant by that. Think of God's people today and what they encounter, people you know, people you fellowship with. And then think of yourself, can you take the words of Psalm 10 upon your lips? Can you put them in your hearts? Can you sing? Can you meditate upon these things? Can you pray these words before the Lord with the kind of assurance and honesty that the psalmist prays?

Maybe you're wondering, "Well, I don't know that this really fits my situation. I don't know that I've really suffered as a prey to a predator." Well, let's make it very concrete, let's think of some specific instances where this might be a very real problem for people today in the Christian church. Think of someone in this congregation perhaps who is suffering at the workplace, being ridiculed for taking a stand for Christian truth. Or think about the person who is not allowed to elevate higher in the company, he's not able to advance because certain practices will not be condoned, certain practices will not be followed, he will not cut corners. In other words, his own integrity prevents him from doing things that the company may say, "Well, if you want to be a company man, a company woman, this is what's expected of you." There is a form of suffering with that, isn't there? You think of the outright violence upon the church in various places throughout the world. I wonder what things are like for Christians living in Afghanistan right now. It's scary, isn't it? It's a fearful thing to see what's happening. No sooner do the American troops leave and you have the Taliban sitting in the palace. Think of a college student in the public university dealing with a professor who openly mocks Christianity, who says, "If you really believe that, you're a fool. You believe the Bible teaches that about the origins of the universe? You believe this about human nature? You believe that Jesus Christ is both God and man? That Jesus Christ has come to redeem people from their sin?" And you're ridiculed. You're despised.

I think in terms of my own experience in the pastorate and the pastorates of other colleagues in the ministry where this sort of situation may occur. I think of a wife. for example. who is mistreated. maybe she's not physically assaulted. physically brutalized but verbally. emotionally she's mistreated. And one day her husband says, "I don't want to be married to you anymore," and simply leaves. And so now she has to pick up the pieces with her young children still at home. She is suffering intensely. I think of that. I think of Christian business people who have been swindled by professing Christians who are business partners or business associates, and they have nothing, their businesses have

been ruined, their reputations destroyed because of someone else's malfeasance, and they have to start all over again. I think a family quarrel where an inheritance is divided in a way that is utterly unjust because one child manipulated mother or father into changing the will to favor one child over the other. There are all sorts of situations that could be applied here but think of that in terms of someone who is attacked by a predator, someone who is taken advantage of and feels absolutely vulnerable, absolutely powerless to respond, and it seems as though God has nothing to say.

So four things tonight briefly that I want to touch upon in this Psalm. First is the cry of desolation, verse 1; and secondly the assessment that the psalmist gives of the predators who prey upon God's people; thirdly, a cry of reliance upon the Lord; and finally, an affirmation of confidence. You'll find that in the sermon outline notes in your bulletin this evening. What do we have here in Psalm 10 anyway? Ah, we have one of those laments. And what do we do with laments? We don't know quite what to do with laments but we know that laments in the Old Testament in the book of Psalms, are the predominant group of Psalms. There are far more Psalms of lament than there are Psalms of praise. And so we read this tonight and we say, "Well, that may be true for a time long ago but how does this speak to us today?" I want to challenge you to think about how we would incorporate lament for God's people today, particularly how do you incorporate lament into public worship.

Now I've mentioned in previous sermons about the tongue-in-cheek remark that some pastors have made that if we have praise teams, where are our lament teams dressed in sackcloth and ashes crying out to God? But in all seriousness, why don't we pay more attention to laments? What happens, for example, if we simply disregard laments? If for example, our Trinity Psalter hymnal, now we do cover all of the Psalms but let's say that we have a hymnal where there's very little said about lament and the overwhelming number of songs address the issue of praise and adoration and joy, all of which is appropriate, but there should also be a place for laments.

One of the dangers of ignoring the lament either in preaching or in worship in general, is that we give people the impression that in terms of the struggles, in terms of the distress of the Christian life, those things should be left at the door when we walk in, and our worship should focus primarily, if not exclusively, upon praise and adoration. I would challenge you, look at most evangelical worship services today, even look at how they're listed in the bulletin, praise and adoration, sermon, closing song, we're done, we go home. I think if we're more sensitive to the teaching of scripture, if we're more sensitive to God's songbook which is what the book of Psalms is, we have to take into account that the lament should play a much more important role in our lives because we share with the the psalmist and with the people of Israel and with Jesus Christ, the experience of suffering. And what a beautiful thing it is to bring our experience of suffering into the context of public worship, that we come as fellow sufferers and we lay these things before the Lord, we encourage one another, we build one another up, we bear one another's burdens in worship and the preaching of the word. I want you to think about that because I think that's a missing element in a great deal of evangelical worship today, that we don't quite know what to do with it. We're a bit embarrassed to talk this way or to

read, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

This is often the cry, isn't it, of those who suffer. "God, you tell me that you love me, you tell me that you care deeply about my welfare but, God, where are you? Where were you when I was attacked? Where were you when my business failed? Where were you when my spouse deserted me, cheated on me, abused me? Why haven't you protected me from the violence or the abuse, the predatory behavior of others? Why?" But remember this is uttered by someone who knows God, someone who loves God, but someone who feels abandoned by God. Nevertheless, this is not a cry of unbelief. In other words, boys and girls, this is not the psalmist just ranting, just getting it off his chest, as it were, so that he can feel good about letting the steam go, as it were. This is not just accusation against the Lord. This is the cry of faith, and faith if it's going to be truly honest, truly sincere, at times we'll say, "Lord, I don't understand why these things happen." And here in particular it is, "I don't understand why the powerful, the strong, abuse the weak and the helpless. I don't understand why the wicked have to take advantage of God's people. It doesn't make sense to me, God."

This too is a language of faith, is it not? This too is how the soul speaks to God because if we reject the idea that this is ranting, we also have to reject the idea that the way we deal with adversity is simply to keep it within, keep it to yourself. I have also lamented over the years, especially in men's Bible studies, the utter reluctance, the failure of many of our men, myself included, to feel comfortable speaking openly about the struggles that we have as men, as husbands, as fathers, because somehow we feel we have to keep up this veneer that everything in our home it's good, it's right, it's solid, and when you walk in the door and people say, "How are you doing? How's your family doing?" "Everything is fine. I'm blessed." When in reality there is a great deal of distress, there's division at home, there's uncertainty, there's doubt, there's struggling of faith.

We need to be open and honest to God. That's what lament teaches us to do as well. This is the language of speaking, communicating with the covenant God, the God who tells us to pour out our hearts before him. This also, remember, is the psalmist speaking about real life situations. This is not some philosopher speculating about what it must be like in theory for the the weak to be oppressed by the powerful. This is moral outrage. "If God is sovereign, if God loves me, why is this happening to me? I don't understand."

So that is the cry of desolation. Secondly verses 2 through 11, the psalmist goes through a litany of the ways in which the the wicked oppress the people of God, and if we were to summarize verses 2 through 11 in terms of what characterizes the predator in his wickedness, it is this idea, listen carefully, it is the idea that he is immune from divine judgment. "No one's going to hold us accountable. No one's going to punish us. No one is going to call us to account for what we've done. You say your God exists, where is God? How come the wicked seem to be prospering? Why is it that the powerful continue to abuse their power?"

I'll say four things about the wicket in this respect. They are, first of all, proud, verses 2, 3 and 4. They're proud, meaning they're self-ruled, self-exalting. They have their own agendas and they operate by that agenda. They don't see their lives in relationship to the sovereign Lord who will call them to account. They burn, he says, they burn. They are consumed with the harm that they inflict upon others. Maybe they're burning because of greed, they burn because of their lust for power. I mean, we see the political situation in our country today, what makes politicians do what they do? In many cases, it's nothing more than a grab for power. Follow politics long enough and you'll know the first thing, the first thing that most every politician is concerned about is what? How will I be reelected? How do I stay in power? That's that burning. They pursue evil schemes financial, sexual, power schemes. They oppress the poor and the weak to further their own self-interest.

The Bible has a great deal to say, by the way, not only in Psalms but particularly in the Old Testament prophets about the injustice that the wicked, the rich, and the powerful inflict upon the poor and the helpless. The prophecy of Amos speaks at length about this, that God will call to account those who use their position of power and wealth to manipulate and to take advantage of those who have no recourse. These people are proud but they're also, secondly, willful, verses 5 and 6. They do what they want. "No one is going to tell me what to do." Their actions arise from an evil heart that seeks its own way. Verse 6, "He says in his heart, 'I shall not be moved; throughout all generations I shall not meet adversity.'" What does that sound like? Doesn't that sound like these people that do these presentations, that give these lectures, and have these programs talking about how to fulfill your destiny, these self-help gurus, these financial wizards, these people who are supposedly the font of all wisdom. That's how they talk.

But thirdly, they're also godless. "His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression; under his tongue are mischief and iniquity." Notice that expression "under his tongue." In other words, the abuse can be physical, of course, but it can also be verbal. What does he say towards God's people? How does he ridicule? How does he oppress with his mouth with his words? There are no thoughts about God. God's not even part of the equation. Nothing he does is guided by God's will, God's judgment or God's lordship. So we begin to see a pattern here, do we not? It's not simply a litany of what the wicked are like, but it's to see the wicked not only in terms of the relationship to the one who's being abused, to the prey, it is the wicked seen in their relationship. to God. That's what he wants to draw your attention to.

The fourth thing you notice is that they are predatory, and the description here is like a wild animal lurking in the bushes, hiding behind a tree, waiting for just the right moment to pounce, to attack, to sink his teeth into his prey. In other words, there's premeditation. There's deliberate intent. These things do not happen by accidents. "He says in his heart," verse 11, ",God has forgotten he has hidden his face, he will never see it." He will never see it. If you ever read sometime of what happens in a situation of war where a great war crime is committed, let's say an entire village is wiped out, oftentimes those who give the command to have that done will say, will rationalize it by saying, "Nobody is going to be the wiser. No one will know. And besides, even if they do know, if we remain in power,

if we control things, what are they going to do about it?" That has happened throughout world history, by the way. That's the mindset of the predator. Neither fear nor love hinders his self-centeredness. And those who suffer at the hands of these kind of people need to speak to God about them, and need to speak to God about them in terms of how God looks at the wicked, and how God will deal with the predators.

That brings us, thirdly, then, to the cry of reliance, verses 12 through 15. Notice the contrast here. In verse 1, God seemed distant, although the psalmist still cries out to him. Now the psalmist cries for God to be near, to draw near. "Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand; forget not the afflicted." God can do something in response to the oppression of predatory people, can't he? We know that. How do we know that? Because scripture has told us and because the psalmist looks back upon history, Jesus Christ looks back upon the scriptures and says, "God has done it in the past. There is no reason why he wouldn't do it in the future." God can rise up, he can lift his hand. He can remember his people and his promises to them. "I will be a God to you and your descendants after you. I will never leave you, nor will I forsake you. I will never let the wicked ultimately prevail." God does not promise to spare us or spare his people from hardship, from suffering or sorrow. God never promises that but he says, "I will be with you. I will guide you and ultimately righteousness will prevail." We know from Scripture and here in Psalm 10 as well, that evil thrives on darkness and concealment. What did Jesus say to Nicodemus in John 3? The wicked, they love the darkness. He's speaking here metaphorically, of course. The wicked like to have their sinful deeds concealed because they know that what they're doing is wicked and they don't want it exposed to the light of day. But nothing can escape God's gaze. He sees all of it for what it really is.

Those who suffer at the hands of wicked people need many things and there are many resources they can draw upon. Think for example, if we had in our own congregation a wife who was suffering at the hands of an abusive father. Does that mean we simply say or we'd ask our pastor, or we ask the elders to say or to advise, "Well, just leave it to God." That's all that we're called to do is tell you to leave it to God. No. We have to secure that wife's safety and the children's safety. We have to minister to that wife and those children and as much as possible minister to that husband as well. That may not be easy. It may be very difficult. It may take a long period of time. It may require the elders to exercise church discipline upon a husband who is abusive and not repentant of it.

I cringe to think of an experience that I underwent as part of a classis meeting a number of years ago, and I can refer to this without getting into the specifics, but it involved a situation with one of our churches where an allegation was made of verbal abuse, emotional abuse by a wife or from a wife against her husband, and when that complaint of abuse was brought before the elders, a committee of elders went to visit this couple in their home. What do you think was the text that was quoted on that visit? The text that was quoted was, believe it or not, "Wives, be submissive to your husbands in all things." That was painful to hear. Now I truly believe that the elders, and I knew these elders, were sincere and godly men, but it was not a wise decision to make in ministering to someone who truly felt that she was being mistreated by her husband. That had not been

established yet, but the first thing is not to say to someone who cries out for help, "Well, you've just gotta learn to be submissive to your husband, you see?"

Or I've seen also elders who go to minister to a couple having serious marital problems and sadly, almost always by the time it reaches the attention of the elders, it's in crisis mode. It's near the end leading up to divorce. But imagine the first thing that comes from your lips is a quote from Malachi, "God hates divorce." You don't have to convince that couple that God hates divorce. They hate divorce, too. But right now they feel as though they have no other option.

People in situations such as Psalm 10 need to know that they can reach out to God, that God is near to them, that God hears them, that God cares deeply for them. It's a cry here in Psalm 10 of faith, not of pride, not of vindictiveness. It's not the psalmist saying, "God, I want you to get them and get them good." God will address the wicked in his own time and in his own way. Faith allows us to let go of bitterness and to let God have his way. Think of Jesus on the cross and what does he pray? "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." But there is also the truth and the hope and the encouragement of the justice of God, that wickedness may prevail for a time, but ultimately it will not win. It will not have its way.

And this cry of reliance knows that, that cry of reliance builds upon that, which leads us finally, to the confident affirmation, verses 16 through 19. The Psalm ends in quiet confidence. There's this peace, there's this resolution that God will ultimately have his way. "The LORD is king forever and ever; the nations perish from his land. O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted," and what will he do? Notice, he "will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed." Think of the fatherless, the orphan in the Bible is, what? The most vulnerable person, and the Bible says over and over again that God comes to the rescue of the orphan, of the fatherless, "so that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more." Jesus cried out on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Quoting from Psalm 22, seeing himself as ultimately the suffering man of God bearing the sins of God's people. But how does he end his time on the cross before he dies? He says. "It is finished. Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

God is the God who has revealed his name to us, verse 17, "O Lord," meaning Yahweh, God of the covenant. It is upon those covenant promises that we we cling to, we take heart and we rest in. Think of the perspective that the scriptures give us in this regard. Think of Romans 5:3 through 5, we rejoice in our sufferings. Who speaks that way? We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces patience. You have Job and at the end of that book in Job 42:5, "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you." He had all these questions. He wanted to, in the words of C. S. Lewis, put God in the dock, God on the witness stand, as it were, and say, "God, you had better answer my questions. Why is this happening?" And when the Lord confronts him, he realizes that he's in no place to be making judgments about God, but he must learn to trust in the sovereign wisdom of his Maker.

Or think of James 1:2 through 4, "Count it all joy when you fall into various trials knowing that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."

I had opportunity recently to talk with a former parishioner about the regrets I had as a pastor in dealing with this person's particular situation, regrets about not having done more and feeling very guilty about that for many years. And this person responded to me in ways that humbled me, but also put me to shame in a good sense. This person said to me, "But God was good to me through it all." And I thought, you know, that person's answer was better than what I had offered to this person by way of my own confession. This person said, "Yeah, it was difficult, but God was very good to me. Very good to my family during all of this." And God is always good.

God has revealed himself through his Son Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ, we know, has dealt a definitive blow to sin, to Satan and to hell and to all those who seek to inflict evil and harm upon God's people. Why does God wait to inflict justice? Romans 2 says it's a sign of his kindness, he's patient, but also that God is waiting for the cup of his wrath to be filled to the full. He waits also, he holds off on that final judgment, so that all whom he has elected unto eternal life are saved. The decisive blow was dealt at the cross and until Jesus Christ returns, we wait and we say like the saints do in Revelation 6, they cry out, the martyrs do, remember? They say, "How long, O Lord," and the Lord says, "Wait, wait just a little while longer until the full number of the martyrs is fulfilled."

You think of Lord's Day 19 of the Heidelberg Catechism. What is the comfort of confessing the return of Jesus Christ to judge the living and the dead? And I think you can only appreciate that fully if you understand that question, the context of suffering and depression. What I'm saying is you have to put yourself in the shoes of people who have lost loved ones, people who have been beaten, people who have been imprisoned, people who have witnessed martyrdom for the sake of Jesus Christ because the answer in Lord's Day 19 is that the comfort of Christ's return is that he will judge all of his enemies, that is, Christ's enemies and mine. I've often asked the kids in Catechism, in high school Catechism in particular, "Doesn't that seem vindictive that we would say that, I can't wait for the day when Jesus will destroy all his enemies and mine"? You wouldn't ask that question if you had witnessed the oppression of the wicked personally.

So the question tonight is "how will you respond? Do you see yourself in this Psalm? Have you known the kind of suffering that the psalmist speaks of? Can you incorporate laments into your own life, maybe your personal devotions, maybe your prayer life? Let's think about how we can incorporate it into our corporate worship. Again, it's not meant to be a funeral dirge, but should there not be an opportunity for all of us to gather together and bear one another's burdens in terms of the struggle of our faith? Will we respond in faith or will we imitate the wicked? What a blessing to know, dear friends, that our Lord Jesus Christ reigns in heaven and will reign until every enemy is destroyed, the last enemy being death itself. Cry out to him. He hears you. He has answered you and he will answer you for Jesus' sake.

Let's pray.

Father, we pray tonight in particular, for those who see a very clear reflection of their own lives in Psalm 10. We pray for those who have suffered abuse whether it's in the home or at the place of work. We pray for tonight for those throughout the world who have suffered in unspeakable ways at the hands of wicked people. But we do not, Father, pray in distress or in unbelief, but rather we have been reminded tonight that you are faithful to your promise, that justice will prevail. So may that encourage us, may that fill our hearts with hope, may that give us patience to bear with adversity in this life, knowing that just as with the cross, suffering must come first and then glory. So bless this word to our hearts, we pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.