

Two thrones vie for control, the eternal throne of the Lord (Ps 93:2) and the corrupt throne of the wicked (Ps 94:20). Psalm 93 celebrates Yahweh's reign. He is robed in majesty, he is mightier than the chaos, and his commands stand firm forever. Psalm 94 laments the power of the wicked to crush the people of God, to slay the widow, to kill the foreigner, and to murder the fatherless. The psalmist calls for the Lord "to pay back to the proud what they deserve" (Ps 94:2). This juxtaposition of psalms and the clash of thrones, one sovereign and just, the other pretentious and evil, is celebrated and lamented *in worship*.

The reason these two psalms are back-to-back and set in a sequence of Psalms 90-99 is because they explore the already and not-yet reality of the reign of God. God's rule has begun, salvation history is unfolding, but the final judgment and the consummation of salvation has not yet taken place. Meanwhile, the throne of destruction continues to produce misery and wreck havoc. The people of God announce, "Yahweh reigns!" even as they wait for God to set things right and bring about his judgment of the wicked. The certainty of the Lord's sovereignty is held in tension with the certainty of the Lord's retributive justice.

If we are guilty of a rote recital of Psalm 93's exuberance, we are probably guilty of ignoring altogether Psalm 94's painful plea for justice. We know neither the agony nor the ecstasy of real worship. We have trimmed reality to consumer satisfaction and left the real issues outside the scope of worship. We edit out the psalms that don't fit our up-beat worship service and we cut out subjects that people might find awkward or difficult. Psalm 94 takes us out of our comfort zone and places us in the mess and muddle of a sin-twisted, broken world. Who wants to be reminded *in worship* of evildoers who oppress the poor and gang up on the innocent? Acting as a faithful worship pastor the psalmist boldly says, "We do!"

Psalm 94 begins with a plea for justice, asking God to rise up and judge the wicked, followed by a description of the hateful actions and arrogant attitudes of the wicked (94:1-7). The "senseless" and "foolish" among the people are put on notice that the Lord knows the futility of their plans and lives. On the contrary those who trust in the Lord and put their confidence in the law will be remembered and vindicated (94:8-15). Yet this still leaves the psalmist feeling alone and vulnerable until he consoles himself with the Lord's unfailing love, security, and eventual vindication (94:16-23).

Judge of the Earth

*The Lord is a God who avenges.
O God who avenges, shine forth.
Rise up, Judge of the earth;
pay back to the proud what they deserve.
How long, Lord, will the wicked,
how long will the wicked be jubilant?
They pour out arrogant words;*

*all evildoers are full of boasting.
They crush your people, Lord;
they oppress your inheritance.
They slay the widow and the foreigner;
they murder the fatherless.
They say, "The Lord does not see;
the God of Jacob takes no notice."
Psalm 94:1-7*

The psalmist is eager for retributive justice, but only the Lord who is robed in majesty and whose statutes are holy can “shine forth” and vindicate the righteous, retaliate against the wicked, and set things right. To be indifferent to these fundamental concerns or squeamish in their articulation, *especially in worship*, is to turn a deaf ear and a blind eye to the pressing social justice concerns of the people of God. The apostle echoes the psalmist’s conviction when he writes, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of the everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Rom 12:17-19; Deut 32:35).

The gospel does not displace the psalmist’s concern for justice nor render his prayer anachronistic. The psalmist’s plea not only belongs to an earlier dispensation, but to the shared passion of God’s people throughout salvation history. The Jesus-centered gospel echoes the psalmist cry for justice, even as it pronounces more emphatically the good news of salvation. We are all sinners in need of salvation by grace through faith in the one who gave his own life as an atoning sacrifice for our redemption. We must include ourselves among those who are guilty of pouring out arrogant words and oppressing others through our sinful actions. We may not have pulled the trigger on the widow or murdered the orphan, but through our indifference and apathy the helpless have suffered. The social justice implications of our wealth and power, our voting history, our hoarding of wealth, and our business decisions need to be reckoned with. In the church today, a couple, who has been denied health insurance coverage for an essential operation for their newborn baby, may sit in the same pew with an executive who made that decision. Everyday we make costly decisions that value the “bottom line” over the just and righteous treatment of the person. The authentic Christ-follower must make a difference in such situations or be found among the ranks of those who say, “The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob takes no notice.”

To argue that the wrath of God is obsolete would be to argue against the teaching of the Bible, the nature of God, and even the moral sensibilities of what it means to be human.¹ Miroslav Volf asks us to imagine giving a lecture in a war zone to people “whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit.” The subject is “a Christian attitude toward violence” and the thesis is that “the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance.” Volf, himself a Croatian who lived and taught in Croatia during the war in former

¹ Webster, Followers of the Lamb, 231.

Yugoslavia, argues that non-retaliation and the possibility of reconciliation is grounded in the reality of God's judgment. If there is no divine accountability for sin and evil, it is impossible to live out the gospel of Christ. To deny the wrath of God often means that one has not experienced the horrors of war and the tragedy of evil.² Let's be clear on the meaning of wrath. Wrath does not mean "the intemperate outburst of an uncontrolled character. It is rather the temperature of God's love, the manifestation of his will and power to resist, to overcome, to burn away all that contradicts his counsels of love."³ The wrath of God is not an embarrassment but a blessing. It is a moral necessity inherent in God's holiness and love and absolutely essential for human flourishing.

The psalmist paints a particularly colorful and damning picture of the wicked. The question, "How long?" is repeated twice for emphasis implying that this evil has gone on unchecked for some time. The wicked are described as jubilant and unashamed. They are proud of their evil accomplishments. They crush, oppress, slay, and murder the weak and defenseless among the people of God, boasting all the while of their personal gain and corporate profit. It is an "inside job" orchestrated by Israelites against the people of God – their own people. They project their own moral indifference and ambiguity onto God, reasoning that the Lord does not see nor care.

Through the centuries believers have asked this same question, "How long?" In the Book of Revelation martyred saints cry out, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (Rev 6:10). This fifth seal revelation honors the eighth beatitude: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). The apostle and the psalmist alike look forward to the judgment of God. But until then, patience, vigilance, and courage are required.

Wisdom Prevails

*Take notice, you senseless ones among the people;
you fools, when will you become wise?
Does he who fashioned the ear not hear?
Does he who formed the eye not see?
Does he who disciplines nations not punish?
Does he who teaches mankind lack knowledge?
The Lord knows all human plans;
he knows that they are futile.*

*Blessed is the one you discipline, Lord,
the one you teach from your law;
you grant them relief from the days of trouble,
till a pit is dug for the wicked.
For the Lord will not reject his people;
he will never forsake his inheritance.*

² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 304.

³ M. Barth, *Ephesians*, 231-232.

*Judgment will again be founded on righteousness,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.*
Psalm 94:8-15

Two groups of people are addressed. First, senseless fools are warned to become wise, because the one who created hearing, hears, and the one who created seeing, sees. In a series of rhetorical questions the psalmist seeks to convict and sober the Israelites who think that somehow they can get away with disobeying God's law and abusing God's people. They may conceive of a moralistic theistic deity that is satisfied with temple worship and is distant and detached when it comes to the daily affairs of life. The first question is incredulous: "when will you become wise?" The implication is that there is no excuse. The obvious answer lies in being convinced that God really knows and cares: "Does he who fashioned the ear not hear?" "Does he who formed the eye not see?" Of course he does!

The next two questions expose false dichotomies. Sin-prone as we are we would like to think that God weighs in on the big issues and leaves us alone to do our own thing. The psalmist asks, "Does he who disciplines nations not punish?" The question implies that the fool thinks he can get by with his shady, exploitive, and abuse ways, because God is preoccupied with larger issues. The second question, "Does he who teaches mankind lack knowledge?" implies a dichotomy between theory and practice. The fool thinks to himself, God has set the law, but it is up to us to work it out in practical ways and if the "little people" get crushed in the pursuit of the bottom line and "my success" that's their problem. The psalmist weighs in against this foolish thinking and every effort to distance the believer from the Lord's moral imperative. His bottom line is this: "The Lord knows all human plans; he knows they are futile" (Ps 94:11). The apostle Paul quoted this verse from Psalm 94 when he warned the believers in Corinth not to be deceived by the wisdom of the age, "For the wisdom of the world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness' (Job 5:13), and again, 'The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile' (Ps 94:11)" (1 Cor 3:19-20).

The second group of people addressed are the faithful who seek to please the Lord. They are not warned; they are blessed. These sincere believers are given reassurance that the hardships they face discipline and strengthen their faith and their faithfulness. What the evildoer intends for harm, the Lord intends for our good (Gen 50:20). The psalmist implies that it is to our advantage to be tried and tested, because a true understanding of practical obedience doesn't happen automatically. This is a powerful New Testament theme. We need to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil 2:12-13). James said, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything" (James 1:2-4). The author of Hebrews believed that suffering provided resistance training, strengthening the believer's moral and ethical actions. We were meant to become like Jesus learning obedience by what we suffer (Heb 5:8). We face a constant choice.

We either take “the path of least resistance — going along with the values, norms, and practices” acceptable to society — or we obey the will of God and suffer “the consequences of criticism and condemnation by unbelieving family and friends.”⁴

The blessing of the Lord’s discipline is followed by the reassurance that the Lord will grant relief, “till a pit is dug for the wicked” (Ps 94:13; see Pss 7:15; 9:15; 35:7-8). The promise continues to be affirmed that the Lord will set things right and hold evildoers accountable. The Lord will not abandon his people, he will not forsake his inheritance. When the psalmist says, “Judgment will again be founded on righteousness, and all the upright in heart will follow it,” he is not placing the burden of good works on sin-prone individuals. He is not challenging the faithful to try harder to prove themselves. On the contrary his message of reassurance is based on Yahweh’s covenant commitment to his people. Righteousness rests on the covenant of grace and all the upright in heart rejoice.

The Throne of Destruction

*Who will rise up for me against the wicked?
Who will take a stand against evildoers?
Unless the Lord had given me help,
I would soon have dwelt in the silence of death.
When I said, “My foot is slipping,”
your unfailing love, Lord, supported me.
When anxiety was great within me,
your consolation brought me joy.
Can a corrupt throne be allied with you –
a throne that brings misery by its decrees?
The wicked band together against the righteous
and condemn the innocent to death.
But the Lord has become my fortress,
and my God the rock in whom I take refuge.
He will repay them for their sins
and destroy them for their wickedness;
the Lord our God will destroy them.*

Psalm 93:16-23

The dilemma of belonging to God in a perverse world is keenly felt by the psalmist. He feels very much alone and powerless in his desire to remain faithful. He is at the end of his rope. A lonely “me” cries out for help and quickly adds, “If God hadn’t been there for me, I never would have made it” (Ps 94:17, MSG). If the Lord in his unfailing love had not held him fast, he would have fallen (see Psalm 73:2). When he was upset and beside himself, the Lord calmed him down and cheered him up. Each problem identified by the psalmist, his vulnerability, his defenselessness, his weakness, and his anxiety, is matched by the Lord’s help, his unfailing love, his presence, his support, and his joy. That “comrade in arms” feeling between the psalmist and the Lord is a true

⁴ Jobes, *1 Peter*, 265.

benefit to weathering the chaos of a fallen, sin-twisted and broken world.

The psalmist asks a question that demands an emphatic “no.” The corrupt throne that brings on misery cannot exist alongside the righteous throne of the Lord whose holy statutes adorn the household of faith. Calvin recognized the danger of a similar “emergency” when “the wicked may be permitted, in the providence of God, to mount the seat of judgment, and launch destruction upon the upright and the righteous, under color of law.” He goes on to say that “we must learn to bear submissively not only with unrighteous violence, but with charges most injurious to our character, and most undeserved.”⁵ Along these same lines, Spurgeon feared the tyrannical rule of a national church with its synagogue of Ritualism and its popish idols and pompous priests. He envisioned an immoral morality that reinforced sectarian dogma at the expense of faithfulness and obedience.⁶

No matter how powerful the wicked may become by banding together against the righteous and condemning the innocent to death, the psalmist declares that the Lord, who is “my fortress,” “my rock,” and my “refuge,” will repay evildoers for their sins and destroy them for their wickedness. At the beginning, the psalmist repeats twice for emphasis that God alone avenges, and now at the end, he repeats twice for emphasis, that God alone will destroy the wicked.

⁵ Calvin, Psalms, 30.

⁶ <http://www.romans45.org/spurgeon/treasury/ps094.htm>