

Why aren't you here when I need you?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 15 March 2020

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 0 0] The question of Psalm 10 hardly needs an introduction, does it? We surely, all of us, have been in that place of verse 1, asking, why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

Perhaps some of us are feeling that way right now or will be in the days and weeks and months ahead. Whether it is to come, whether it is our reflections on the past, this is not a foreign experience to us to feel like God is far away.

And this Psalm is abrupt and somewhat urgent in its asking of these questions. Why, when I most need you, why are you nowhere to be found? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why do you permit the wicked to swallow up those more righteous than themselves? Why, God, do bad things happen to good people? Why, God, if you are supposedly almighty, do you let this go on? Why, if you are supposedly a benevolent God, have you created a world where it seems like the most effective way to get ahead in life is to lie and cheat and swindle your way through?

Why do the wicked prosper? Why, God, is this world the way that it is? I'm going to dive into the details of the complaint in a minute, but first we need to unpick the question a little bit.

[1 : 2 4] So my first heading this morning is faithful questioning. Two things here make me confident that this question in verse 1 is not a sinful attitude that needs to be rebuked, but rather is a question that we can legitimately take upon our own lips as we grapple with the realities of this world.

First reason, the word why. Both of these questions here in verse 1 are why questions, aren't they? And that is a good thing, because behind the word why is the implicit recognition that God seems to be acting out of character.

The fact that we're asking why are things not good right now implies that the normal course of things is for God to be present, to not seem far off. It implies that the psalmist expects God's aid.

It implies that for David, there was a previous time when he saw the goodness of God much more readily apparent to him than he does as he writes this psalm.

David asks why God seems far off, because normally that is not his experience. So the why presupposes faith. Secondly, we can notice the pronouns in these questions.

[2 : 3 7] Notice in both cases the question is, why are you doing this? See, there's two ways that questions about God and suffering get asked.

The first comes from a place of kind of intellectual curiosity that asks this as a question to be pondered, a theoretical matter of inquiry. Think of university students staying up far too late at night and off into their abstract philosophizing.

Think of the belligerent atheist who thinks that in raising this question he has a knockdown argument.

That's the first route into this kind of question about how God and suffering relate to one another. The second way that we come to this question is quite different though.

The second question doesn't come from a place of intellectual curiosity, but from a place of personal pain. The second person is in the thick of it, grappling with the cancer diagnosis, feeling beset by enemies, feeling overwhelmed at work.

[3 : 48] For them this is not an abstract question, but a devotional dilemma. For them this is a matter of faith. And notice how differently the questions get asked.

The questions here in the psalm don't start off with, if God is both sovereign and benevolent, then why? No, this question is, why do you?

This question is addressed to God. David at this point doesn't understand his Lord, but he's still talking to him. And sometimes that's what faith looks like.

Continuing with God, even when we don't fully understand what is going on. It's a slight tangent, but worth noting. That this distinction between the two ways that this question gets asked, this is a distinction well worth being aware of when you're engaging with other people.

Because if you treat somebody in that second category, coming from a place of pain, if you treat them as if their question is intellectual and theoretical, then you run a serious risk of making that pain worse and alienating them.

[4 : 56] So you do well to express sympathy first, to join them in their place of pain, before you try to offer an answer. On the other hand, if the question is intellectual, then you do want some actual arguments in response, not empty platitudes.

Or maybe even you want to recognize that this isn't actually a point that's useful to engage on, but rather this is a smokescreen question that tries to avoid dealing with bigger issues.

So be careful who you're dealing with when these kinds of questions come up. Ask clarifying questions to find out where they are coming from in asking this. So here in verse 1, we've concluded this psalm is coming from a place of faith.

David is grappling with his situation. David feels abandoned, and he's not alone in that. This idea recurs in Psalm 55, in Lamentations 3, in Isaiah 49, and so on.

It is not an unusual experience, or at least not an unheard of experience, to feel like God is far away. Ultimately, it's never true that God is far off.

[6 : 02] He never actually has hidden himself. And I think by the end of the psalm, David reaches that conclusion. But in the meantime, like David, this might be how we find ourselves feeling.

This might be how circumstances look to us. Now, from verse 2 onwards, David begins to describe the situation. And once again, as in previous psalms, the problem lies with the wicked man, who in this case is hunting down the weak.

And as we'll see, this wicked man dismisses God as irrelevant. And our second heading, therefore, is practical atheism. I think the primary reason why this psalm is here for us in God's Word is to give us comfort when we ourselves are in the situation that David's in, when we are sore pressed by our enemies or when God seems far away from us.

I think that's the primary reason this is here. However, along the way, David spends quite a bit of time discussing the nature and the character of this enemy. And so it's wise that we spend some time on that ourselves.

Why do we do that? Well, two reasons. Firstly, Dale Ralph Davis, he says these verses, they keep the pain alive. They remind us that we should be uncomfortable. We should let it feel wrong when the wicked prosper and the afflicted are bullied into submission.

[7 : 25] We do not party while the world burns. Rather, we mourn. We cry out to God, it should not be this way. That's reason one.

Secondly, it's beneficial to spend some time on this to consider the character of the wicked man because of the uncomfortable possibility that we might see something of ourselves reflected back.

Now, of course, we all want to read ourselves into this psalm in David's role. And that's good and right. And we should want to see ourselves reflected in him, and legitimately so.

But what if we aren't? What if that's not the experience of this psalm that most closely parallels where we are? Or what if there are for us elements of both?

And so this wicked man is described for us here. And the first few verses are all about his pride, his arrogance, his boasting. It's a consistent feature of sinful humanity that we want to elevate ourselves, to increase our own importance.

[8 : 31] Think about how the serpent tempted Eve back in the garden. Genesis 3.5, God knows that when you eat from that tree, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

The serpent tempts Eve to want to elevate herself, to be like God, to think of herself better than she actually is, to be boastful, prideful, arrogant. She's tempted by the idea of being like God.

And consistently our pride causes us to think that we are more competent than we are, and sometimes with disastrous consequences. In Jurassic Park, one of the scientists commenting on the mess of these dinosaurs rampaging around, he says, your scientists were so preoccupied with whether they could they didn't stop to think if they should.

Now that is a made-up story in Jurassic Park, but that arrogance is all too real around us today. Whatever the good, sore ills of nuclear power, Chernobyl shows us it's all too possible for our impression of our abilities to far outstrip the reality.

And we could think of other scientific instances of that. But on a more personal scale, perhaps, more immediate for you and for me, this arrogance, this pride, it leaves us with a sense, an attitude of entitlement.

[9 : 56] Why shouldn't I throw my weight around to get whatever it is that I want? Because I deserve it. Well, that is not the Christian way. Paul exhorts the Philippians to have the humility to consider others better than themselves.

Here in Psalm 10, this issue is compounded by the fact that this bullying arrogance, well, it so often succeeds, doesn't it? Do you see there in verse 5, his ways, the wicked man's ways are always prosperous.

The wicked man's schemes often do seem to work. And therefore, his attitude is reinforced. He thinks to himself that nothing will ever be a threat to him because it never has been.

And in his pride, he's willing to trample on other people to get what he wants. And how has he ended up with that attitude? Well, the second half of verse 4, in all his thoughts, there is no room for God.

Verse 11, he says to himself, God will never notice. He covers his face and never sees. And verse 13, he says, God won't call me to account. He has this attitude because he thinks he's immune.

[11 : 07] There's a question of translation in verse 4 whether God is not in his thoughts or whether he thinks there is no God. The words could be translated either way. It could be the second that he's saying there is no God.

But if it is that, then it's mere bravado because he admits the existence of God in those later verses, in verse 11 and verse 13. And therefore, there is no room for God seems a more fitting translation.

It's not so much that he doesn't think God exists. It's that he thinks God is completely irrelevant. He's not worth spending time thinking about because the evidence so far, he thinks, is that God does not care.

He doesn't need to pay any attention to God's laws because nothing will ever do him any harm. He doesn't need to worry about his victims because God will not notice. He can safely revile God because he will not call him to account.

Sure, God's out there somewhere, but he's irrelevant. So this is what we might call practical atheism. Mostly when we talk about atheism, we're thinking about Richard Dawkins and his gang confidently proclaiming God does not exist straight up, pure and simple, nothing beyond the naturally explicable universe and so on.

[12 : 21] But I think that consistent atheism, I think that attitude is actually less common than the second type of atheism, which is more subtle and which I think is exemplified by the attitude of the wicked man in this psalm.

For people living at the time of David, the possibility that no gods exist would barely have entered their heads. But what you did get was people for whom the existence of said God or gods had little to no practical impact on their lives because they thought God disengaged and uninterested.

Now where for the psalmist the fact that God seems far off, where for David that's a problem, a cause for concern, well for the wicked man God's remoteness is a delight.

And I think this attitude is alive and well today. A few years ago now, but back in 1982, George Gallup, the famous pollster, he published an article entitled Is America's Faith For Real?

Amongst other points, he noted that 95% of Americans believe in God. Only about half could be found in church on an average Sunday morning.

[13 : 37] But to me, the most telling statistic is this one. Only one in eight said that religion makes a significant difference difference in their lives. 95% say there is a God.

One in eight say it makes a difference. And somehow, I don't think the picture is any more encouraging today. Maybe the number of consistent atheists has increased, but I'm sure there are still plenty of these practical atheists out there.

Plenty who say they believe in God, and yet for whom he makes no difference in their lives. And let's be clear, when we're talking about God making a difference in someone's life, I don't just mean whether they're here in church on a Sunday morning.

The question is how they spend the rest of their time. The issue is the attitude with which you approach your day-to-day. Because the pages of history are replete with examples of people who sat in the pews one moment and went off to abuse and mistreat their neighbors the next.

I read recently an account of a church elder in the American South many years ago who on the Lord's Day served a man the Lord's Supper and then the next morning picked up his cane and beat that same man, one of his slaves, for some minor infraction.

[15 : 01] Now I suggest that there the church elder was behaving as a practical atheist, believing that God would not notice his behavior, would not call him to account for that mistreatment.

This wasn't just a problem in David's day. The apostle Peter predicted that similar attitudes would continue. Chapter 3 of his second letter he writes, You must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires.

They will say, Where is this coming he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation. But they deliberately forget that long ago by God's word the heavens came into being and the earth was formed out of water and by water.

Notice in what Peter writes, it's a deliberate forgetting. It's a choice to dismiss the reality of God. But Peter assures them the day of the Lord will come like a thief.

The heavens will disappear with a roar. The elements will be destroyed by fire and the earth and everything done in it will be laid bare. And given that that is true, what kind of people ought you to be?

[16:15] You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. So what we're seeing here is the central body of this psalm reminds us of the arrogance of life lived without reference to God and calls us instead to live holy and godly lives.

To recognize that God is not only out there in some kind of theoretical sense but that God is near at hand. He calls us to expect God's existence to have a daily impact upon our lives.

May that be your experience and mine. Nevertheless, that section of the psalm is encapsulated within the question of verse 1 and the confident pleading of verse 12 onwards which forms our third heading this morning.

In these verses, at the close of the psalm, we see urgency and confidence intertwined. Verse 12 is a cry to God to act. If God seemed far off, if he seemed hidden, if he seemed dormant, now the psalmist longs for that to change.

Three times already we've heard this same cry. Psalm 3 verse 7, Arise, Lord, deliver me, my God. Strike all my enemies on the jaw. Break the teeth of the wicked. Psalm 7 verse 6, Arise, Lord, in your anger.

[17:42] Rise up against the rage of my enemies. Awake, my God, decree justice. And Psalm 9 verse 19, Arise, Lord, do not let mortals triumph.

Let the nations be judged in your presence. Three times already in the book of Psalms, this same call. Arise, Lord. Get up and do something. David is quite definite.

He needs God to act. Whatever the situation, whichever occurrence of him being hard-pressed that we know of from his life, whichever of those situations he's in right now, what he needs is for God to intervene.

I don't think it's actually that he thinks God is asleep at the wheel so much as that he needs God to demonstrate that he isn't. He needs God to lift up his hand, which is firstly a call for God to punish, verse 15, for him to break the arm of the wicked.

If the evildoer believes that he will not be called to account, well, this is a cry for God to prove him wrong. This is a call for God to punish. And that is the ultimate reality which both Old and New Testaments point towards.

[18:52] Paul shares the confidence that justice will be done. He writes in 2 Corinthians, we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ so that each of us may receive what is due us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

The guilty will be punished. And at one and the same time, as well as a call for God to punish, this is also a call for rescue, a cry for vindication.

The second half of verse 12, do not forget the helpless. We saw in Psalm 9, God does not forget the plight of the needy. And that affirmation is repeated here in Psalm 10.

Verse 11, we hear the wicked man saying to himself that God never sees. David reminds himself, verse 14, this is simply not true. God does see the trouble of the afflicted.

And not only does he see that it is happening, but he considers their grief. He takes it in hand. It's with good reason that victims commit themselves to God because he is the father of the helpless.

[19 : 58] Verse 13, the wicked man believes he will not be called to account. Verse 15, cries out for God to do just that. Now it might be that the guilty go unpunished in the here and now, but you cannot long evade God's justice.

The orphan of verse 18 is representative of all who are utterly dependent upon God, representative of those who lack earthly resources, who don't have a champion of their cause here on earth and therefore know that they need God as their champion, that they need God to defend them, that they need God to break the arm of their oppressor so that earthly mortals are no longer able to strike terror.

That is the confidence that we have. That is our confidence when we face situations where God seems far off.

Our confidence is that the end will come, that justice will be done. And in the meantime, verse 17, know that God does hear. He does listen to our cries and he does promise to encourage the afflicted.

And when we say encourage the afflicted, we don't mean a kind word, there, there and pat you on the back. No, this is the encouragement of knowing that the God who commands the armies of heaven is in your corner.

[21 : 26] That's the encouragement that we're talking about here. So maybe it is distressing that wickedness is tolerated and is allowed to continue. And we do cry with the psalmist how long is this going to continue?

But we also ought to consider the New Testament's answer to that question. We've already looked at several of the verses from 2 Peter 3. We skipped over verses 8 and 9. Peter urges us, do not forget this one thing, dear friends.

With the Lord, a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise. As some understand slowness, instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

So if you are hard-pressed, then pray for God to rise up. But pray too for your oppressor to come to a place of repentance.

And if, if considering your life with sober judgment, if you see rather too many ways in which you have been living as a practical atheist and leaving God as a distant irrelevance six days a week, then know too that his desire is for you to come to repentance.

[22 : 49] He's slow to put an end to your rebellion against him. Why? Not because he does not see, but because his desire is that you not perish.

Let's pray. Lord God, thank you for that confidence we can have that you see the trouble of the afflicted.

Thank you that in those moments where it seems like you are far off, where it feels like you have hidden yourself away, thank you that we can have the confidence that that is not the true reality, but that you do see and you will answer.

When we cry out, arise, Lord, lift up your hand, do not forget the helpless. Thank you we can be confident that that is a prayer you will answer, that you will guard us, you will keep us, you will protect us, you will preserve your children.

Thank you that you are able to preserve us unto the very end. Thank you that in difficult days that that is our comfort in life and in death.

[24 : 04] Thank you, Lord. Amen.