

## **“Praying When God Is Silent”**

11 July 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

### **Welcome & Call To Worship**

**Hymn of Preparation:** I Will Glory In My Redeemer

### **Prayers of Adoration & Confession**

**Reading:** Psalm 10

### **Sermon:**

These two men are from Eritrea. One is the President and the other a doctor; one is free and the other has been languishing in prison for the last 17 years; one has authority and prospers, the other is under authority and poor; one has ordered the killing of many in the Tigray province and the other has tried to save lives; one hates Christians and the other is a Christian. Life for one appears to be OK, the other not. President Isaias Afewerki and Rev. Dr. Teklab Menghisteb.

It is not hard to imagine Dr. Teklab praying Psalm 10:1, and in v.3-11 highlighting the depth of evil that is prevalent in his life and country (v.8), or that in time President Afewerki would become nonchalant and indifferent to any form of accountability. His pleading prayer in v.12 rings true emotionally and in experience. What are we to do when God appears silent?

I listened this week to an audio message of a retired missionary who ministered her whole life in Brazil, faithfully served the Church and people with excellent Bible teaching, writing and conference speaking. She and her husband have retired to Cambridge, England and just found a little house to settle into so they could continue to write and pray for the church in Brazil. However, she inherited a family tendency to osteoporosis and her spine has collapsed and presently she is in constant pain and incapacitated; she echoed the call in the audio message of v.1 and v.12 of this psalm - “Why? Do something, Lord!”

The chat on Live Line this week explored the theme of sexual harassment and assault suffered by many women in Ireland. As I listened on Wednesday, the first caller spoke of being in a public place and no-one intervened. The law was not fit for purpose, in her opinion, and she felt strongly that the perpetrator prospered and sneered at the justice system; this compounds the injustice, which the psalmist echoes (see v.5). Where is God and His justice when injustice prospers?

Of course, these are only a few examples taken from the world around us and there are countless more similar situations that make this issue of the silence of God in the face of evil an important one. So today, we are going to follow the prayer (the cry) of a believer who wonders at the involvement and justice of God when evil abounds, the point being that when we believe in God, who reigns, judges with righteousness, and is a refuge as we discovered in Psalm 9, we wonder, “Why?” The biggest concern is not the question of evil, but the question of why. *Why are you far off? Why do you hide Lord?*

When this happens to us, the pain of the injustice and the abandonment of those you expect to protect you is difficult to understand. Our response because of what has happened to us can often lead to us wanting to give up, to disbelieve and stop trusting God, to question or lose our faith. The psalmist understands this and has written both Psalm 9 and 10 in the

didactic acrostic format to teach us that we can bring our true thoughts to God and to encourage us to remember what is true about God, not give up and continue to exercise faith and trust God. Let us look at it in more detail.

### **I. Lament: Prayer in Trouble and the Apparent Absence of God (v.1-2)**

The absence of God was brought forcibly home to me when, as a trainee GP, I was called to the house of a PCI minister who had a brain tumour. He was heavy with steroid treatment, had collapsed at the top of the stairs and couldn't move. His wife said truthfully with poignancy, *"It is hard to believe in a God of love when you see no evidence of it."* I had no reply!

Lord, why are you distant and hiding when I am in trouble? The proud and arrogant are in the ascendancy, they pursue the weak and capture them in their evil, unjust schemes. This is the lament of the psalmist in v.1-2. There has been a lot of talk of lament as an appropriate response during the Covid crisis. Lament is honest; it tells it as it is, it shares your innermost feelings. Lament in the Bible tells it to God and in that it is an act of faith. This is not railing against God for the sake of it; this is a genuine engagement because you cannot understand. This is out of character with all you know about God. This is not loving when God is love. This is out of control when God reigns. This is personal when God is your Father. Dale Ralph Davis summed this up excellently: *"Faith is perplexed (v.1) and yet goes on pleading (v.2) and presses in on God"*. This is Lament. It is good, because it is faithful and looks to God when life doesn't make sense or God doesn't make sense. We stick with, relate to God despite the lack of evidence. It is important that we pray in such circumstances.

### **II. Prevalent Evil: a description (v.3-11)**

These verses contain a strong and long description of evil. Derek Kinder has suggested that when God is silent then evil is highlighted and uppermost in the mind of the psalmist, hence the prominence of the description of the practice of evil in v.3-11. Evil is described as hurtful, personally so, a deliberate act, immoral, proud, prosperous and successful, determined, foul mouthed, a bully and strong. His description leaves you reeling, shocked and saddened by its reality and prevalence.

He also highlights the thought process, the underlying world view of those who perpetrate such evil. In v.6, we read, *"He says to himself, nothing will shake me; I'll always be happy and never have trouble."* He or they believe they are immune from anyone, nothing can touch me. And in v.11, *"He says to himself, "God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees."* He or they believe in God, in some sense, but the God they believe in is useless, inconsequential and impotent. They function as practical atheists. Many of us in Ireland and in other "Christian" countries are brought up to believe in God, but many live as if He does not matter and does not exist. Such people shake off the shackles of morality and live with impunity, in the mistaken belief that God does not see or care.

When a person or society begins to think they can live with impunity, that there will not be any consequences, in fact they can live positively with the thrill, the rewards of evil, then they will plunge deeper and even start to enjoy it. This is the picture v.7 gives, someone savouring evil. They taste it and enjoy it wanting more. Where evil is prevalent and enjoyed, that is a very scary place to be. Boundaries are thrown off and people do as they please because they think no-one can or will do anything. I sense we are beginning to see glimpses

of this even in our own society. Respect for the person is diminishing, the boundaries we used to live with are being eroded, Judeo-Christian values are rejected, “my rights” predominate, the vulnerable are crushed, the disabled are aborted, and the infirm are to be euthanised. Society is becoming harder, harsher, and what God labels as evil predominates. Evil predominates in the life and mind of the psalmist, all compounded because he does not see God act.

### III. Consider God and Pray (v.12-18)

“Arise, Lord!” This moment is pivotal, a moment of faith, when we ask God to do something. “Arise, Lord! Lift up your hand, O God.” It is not profound, but it is a start. Too often we get stuck on asking our why questions, or we can get stuck in only seeing the prevalent evil and are tempted to doubt God and live with evil for too long. We may even come to believe God does not care, is impotent and distant. Yet a profound change happens when the psalmist’s eyes are taken away from the problem towards God, and as he starts to pray that God would act, we note a growing confidence, boldness, encouragement, and assurance in the situation as he recalls who God is.

**God’s hand acts.** (v.12,14) He sees God anthropomorphically with a hand, strong (a strong right hand is a phrase often used in the Bible to describe God acting and in the person of the Lord Jesus - Psalm 98:1). He prays that God will act. “Arise Lord, lift up your hand”, take the matter in hand, take control. Arise, Lord!

**God sees and acts.** (v.13-14) Dale Ralph Davis has a helpful story (page 120 of his commentary) of a man who died in a hit and run. The driver tried to cover up their crime, but months later the police were alerted about him via an anonymous tip, delivered in a Christmas card of all things. “Someone had seen and acted upon it”. God sees and acts.

**God reigns and acts.** (v.15-16) “The Lord is King for ever and ever.” Disable the arm of the evil person, remove their power and presence. You are King, you reign and act.

**God hears and acts.** (v.17-18) Karen reminded me how she saw something of God in her father, because he just had to be told about a need and he would sort it. It might not happen for a while, but he was thinking, planning, getting materials, building and shaping and eventually he had a solution and put it into practice. I can testify to that being true and it is a lovely picture of God working out his purposes. God hears and acts.

**God a defender of the fatherless.** The end of the Lament in v.18 gives a beautiful picture of God as “defending the fatherless” or looking after the orphan. As I listened on Friday past to Philip Gilmore pay tribute to his uncle, Billy Gilmore, the Holy Spirit reminded me of this phrase in v.18, *defending the fatherless*. Let me recall part of Billy Gilmore’s story, as told by Philip.

At the age of 10 or 11, Billy’s mother died following a serious illness. His father, for some reason, decided the two boys, Billy and Richard, would be best brought up in Dublin by an institution. Billy and his younger brother, Richard, were put on the train to Dublin, their father did not accompany them. They were separated when they arrived, and they saw each other twice a year. (*They were effectively fatherless*).

The psalmist calls on God to defend the fatherless and he believes He will do so. In John's gospel, we read of Jesus's great promise to the disciples in John 14:18, "*I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.*" In time, God brought Richard and Billy to faith, sustained both and prospered them in this life, and gave them the security of eternal life.

When God is silent, lament that fact and interact with Him. Engage in spiritual warfare in prayer and trust Him. He has defeated all enemies, even death, and the truth always strengthens and encourages us as we persevere in life.

**Praise:** We Rest On You, Our Shield And Our Defender

**Prayers for Others**

**Announcements**

**Closing Hymn:** IPH 257(i) What A Friend We Have In Jesus

**Benediction**