

Prayer

Lord my God, my Saviour and my Friend. Help me to speak to You plainly and listen to You intently; then having heard Your voice, may I declare Your truth gladly. I ask for simplicity in the words I use, clarity in the way I use them, and strength to fulfil them in Your name. Thank You Lord God. AMEN

Further Suggestions for Prayer

For prayer today, consider the scriptural example of Samuel. He learned of God from his youth and sought to do His will throughout his life, ending up being a reluctant leader of God's people; the last 'judge' and the first great 'prophet' of God.

Pray that the Lord would raise up people who will live their lives for the Lord from their earliest days until their last; people whose long term commitment makes them worthy of the highest leadership, though they would not seek it. The world needs such people, now.

Meditation

Think about your possessions. Consider their insurance value.

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Reflect for a moment upon what will happen to these things if you became seriously ill, or when you die.

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What do you think Jesus would make of your lifestyle?

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Is there anything you should get rid of, sell or use?

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If appropriate, discuss these things with other family members, or decide when would be a good time to do this.

Bible Study - Psalm 10:12-18

¹² Rise up, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed.

¹³ Why do the wicked renounce God, and say in their hearts, "You will not call us to account"?

¹⁴ But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan.

¹⁵ Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers; seek out their wickedness until you find none.

¹⁶ The LORD is king forever and ever; the nations shall perish from his land.

¹⁷ O LORD, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear

¹⁸ to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more.

God hears the cry of the poor and afflicted

Psalm 10 began by asking the question 'why does God appear to be absent' (v1), but proceeded to tell us that this belief is at the heart of wickedness, principally expressed in the oppression of the poor and needy (see verses 8-10). Today we read the rest of the psalm which talks of God's concern for the underprivileged; of his work for them and his action against the wicked.

The Lord has always shown special concern for those who suffer. He has no favourites when it comes to making judgements about right or wrong, yet in scripture He frequently shows His sympathy for those who suffer because of the wicked actions of others, even if they have perhaps forgotten God. Many times in the Old Testament, God's people are recorded as having forgotten Him; yet when they cry out, he responds. This happened in the first few chapters of Exodus when the people of Israel were in Egypt and the Lord saved them through Moses (Exodus 1&2). The same is true of the famous stories of the Judges (Judges 2:11-23) who came to the rescue of God's people time and time again even though they kept falling away from Him. The most famous example is of when Judah was taken into captivity in Babylon (e.g. Isaiah 17:12; Jeremiah 3:18-4:2), and when they were in their deepest troubles, the prophets gave them God's word, by which they were saved.

Psalm 10 concludes with a strong affirmation of trust in the Lord. He is the one who hears the cry of the afflicted (v17), acts justly against the wicked who have caused their suffering(v15), and moreover, will help victims (v14,17).

Justice and Mercy

I have often heard it said that justice and mercy are two different characteristics of God, as if He chooses to work one way or the other. For example, Graham Kendrick writes of injustice in a well known hymn, going on to say 'in Your anger, Lord, remember mercy ...' I do not want to say that the sentiments of the hymn are wrongly placed, far from it, but I do not believe that God is sitting there in heaven, as it were, deciding whether to act at one moment with justice and judgement, and then the next with mercy. The picture has unhelpfully been exaggerated by those who wrongly see the Old Testament as describing a wrathful, angry God, and the New Testament as describing, through Jesus, a new approach of mercy.

All scriptures paint a picture of God acting with both justice and mercy, sometimes at the same time. In psalm 10, the arrogance of the wicked who think of Him as distant and uncaring is met by His righteous judgement of them 'Break the arm (meaning 'stop his power') of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness ...' (v15), but that is integrally linked to His compassion for the victims of the wicked 'You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry' (v17).

Of course, the wicked will eventually feel the weight of His judgment, as they do in this psalm, but that does not mean to say that the Lord does not have a passion and desire to see those wicked people change their ways and turn to Him again. Also, the victims of injustice feel the benefits of His mercy, but that does not mean to say that they will not come under His judgment if they stray from what they know of the ways of the Lord. Such stories fill the books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, and also form a major theme of Jesus' parables (e.g. the parable of the wicked servant, Matthew 18:23-35).

What we should know is that God, in contrast to many human institutions, laws and judicial procedures, is entirely consistent in His judgments, and He is also never failing in His mercy to all who turn to Him in repentance.

The defeat of the wicked in the land of the Lord

Before this psalm comes to an end, it has a couple of interesting things to say about how the Lord deals with the wicked. The first of these is straightforward. Verse 12 calls on God to 'arise ... lift up Your hand' (v12). This is a glimpse of an ancient battle cry (e.g. Exodus 15:12) and calls on the Lord to quickly confront the wicked who have, up to this point in time, regarded Him as absent and disinterested (see the first half of the psalm). Verse 15 continues the same theme of judgement as the Lord deals with the wicked as His enemy, turning the tables on those who were the enemy of the oppressed.

The second interesting section is in verse 16. The Lord is described as King, and as a result of His warlike actions, 'the nations will perish from His land'. It would be easy to gloss over this brief reference, but it hides something rather interesting. What could it mean?

If you read through the Old Testament you will discover that for much of the time when Israel and Judah were nations (from the time of Saul and David to the Exile in 586BC), people of other nations also lived amongst the Israelites, bringing with them their own gods. In those days, each nation had its own 'gods'. Moreover, as might be considered natural, many Israelite and Judean people intermarried with peoples of other nations. A prime example of this is the marriage of King Ahab to Queen Jezebel (a Sidonian woman who worshipped Baal: 1 Kings 16:31). King Ahab, at his Queen's instigation, worshipped Baal as well as the Lord, and saw nothing wrong with it. Indeed he gradually lost interest in the worship of the Lord, except when confronted with the prophet Elijah! Ahab is an example of what psalm 10 means by a 'wicked person'. He worshipped the Baals, believing that the Lord would not notice or be bothered about this, and he also oppressed his people appallingly in the name of his worship of Baal (see the story of Naboth's Vineyard – 1 Kings 21).

Psalm 10:16 is clearly calling for purity amongst the Lord's people. There is no place for any other nationality (and their worship of other gods), or for the implicit or explicit worship of anyone or anything else by God's people. No other 'Kingdoms' (nations) are allowed, and the Kingdom of God is exclusive. This is a firm and rigorous challenge from Almighty God, with lessons for us all.

The victim, the fatherless, and the oppressed.

At the time of King Ahab, the poor and oppressed in Israel were frequently those who were outcast in society for no reason of their own. Victims of injustice, like Naboth, had little recourse to justice. Widows, as has been so throughout history, were often left destitute for lack of a husband in a male orientated society and depended upon others to provide for them; Old Testament social services were entirely informal! An example is found in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17; without Elijah raising her son, the widow had little chance of survival, quite apart from the endless flour and oil provided! The last verse of Psalm 10 makes it clear that the Lord is always concerned about the poor and oppressed in any society, and seeks to bring them relief from distress.

This psalm also mentions the fatherless, who are often mentioned in Leviticus and Deuteronomy as in special need. In Old Testament society, there were orphans as in any society, but many orphans were the children of temple prostitutes who worked offering sexual services at the temples of the Baals. The Lord's mercy operated for them as well, without favour or discrimination, and despite their connection with the intolerable worship of Baal, this was not their fault. The psalm regards them as defended by the Lord with full justice; this is the extent of His compassion.

The reassuring words of this psalm in verse 17 that God will 'hear the meek' and 'strengthen their heart' are powerful. The Lord hears, encourages, and listens to all those who need his salvation; but more than that, he acts for their defence; and so should we. We know that God has acted in Christ for the fulfilment of this comforting, saving work, but we need to identify ourselves with this same work of justice and salvation. We have the God-given task of identifying the equivalent of the oppressed, fatherless and widow in our own society, and we are called act on their behalf with both justice and mercy, and with His power, authority and strength.

Space for your notes

Questions

1. Can you think of examples of where justice and mercy might be considered as two separate things? Is it too simplistic to say they are two sides of the same coin of righteous action?
2. Is it possible to define wickedness? Do the laws of our land give us confidence that we know what is wrong in society?
3. When you call out to God, what is your experience? Have you called out to him when you feel the victim of injustice? What has been God's response?

Lifestyle Challenge

This week, please choose a challenge from the website, via the link button 'lifestyle challenge' below. Consider choosing a challenge that will encourage you to do something you have not done before. I will add comments derived from daily readings, and my personal experience.

Your challenge What does your challenge do to help bring justice in the world? The answer to this may be convoluted, but it is still worth asking. God is always looking towards the interests of the poor and underprivileged, and that should be reflected in our discipleship.

My experience I have always been cautious about the word 'spirituality'. As a word it is very strange, often used today instead of 'Faith' and almost always used about personal religious choices and lifestyle. I find this hard to equate with God who has directly called us to do His will and defend the poor and underprivileged, as in this psalm; rather than make personal religious choices.

Final Prayer

Grant us, Lord, to know the passion of Your concern for all Your creation, and Your deep concern for the poor and outcast in the world. May all who own Your name work with integrity and sympathy to help all in trouble or distress, so that You Kingdom may come on earth and Your salvation be made known. AMEN