WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER: WHY DO GOOD PEOPLE SUFFER?

PSALM 10

MAIN IDEA

even though God promises to reward the righteous and punish the wicked, it often appears as if the wicked prosper while the innocent suffer.

I. WHERE IS GOD? (VS 1-10)

*The wicked run wild; prospering while exploiting the poor.*

A. God appears to not care (1-2)
B. Wicked pride and prosperity (3-6)
C. Wicked exploitation and intimidation (7-10)

II. A CALL TO ATTENTION (VS 11-14)

*When God’s people see the wicked prosper and go unchecked; they are confused and call out for God to take notice of their plight.*

A. Take notice (11-12)
B. Attitude of arrogance (13)
C. Confidence in God (14)

III. A CALL TO ACTION (VS 15-18)

*God’s people call out to God to judge the wicked.*

A. Judge the wicked (15-16)
B. Listen to and encourage your children (17)
C. Defeat the wicked (18)
Why do the wicked prosper: Why do good people suffer?

Psalm 10

If you remember from last time, we said that most scholars think that Psalm 9 and 10 should be looked at together as one Psalm. Two reasons we gave last time were that first of all, both Psalms are written in an acrostic format. Psalm 9:1 begins with Aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and 10:17 begins with Tau, the last letter in the Hebrew alphabet. Secondly, there is no subtitle on this Psalm. It seems as if the subtitle in chapter 9 is meant to cover both Psalms. That subtitle read, “For the director of music. To the tune of ‘The Death of the Son.’ A psalm of David.” We said that the tune could perhaps be parallel to our blues type of music. There was some allusion to suffering in chapter 9 but it was a lot about God’s faithfulness in the past and His promises for the future.

Chapter 10 doesn’t have a very positive message. I want to caution us about two things as we study through the Psalms. First of all, this is poetry. We have to be very careful about making theology from poetry. Secondly, these are prayers that describe the feelings, thoughts, and emotions of the author. In view of this, we have already observed that the poets do not hold back when they approach God. In this morning’s text, the psalmist feels that God is not engaged in his present situation. The psalmist is confused and agonizes over his world; especially as he reviewed God’s faithfulness and promises in the last chapter. His confusion and agony are expressed as the main idea of this morning’s Psalm. **EVEN THOUGH GOD PROMISES TO REWARD THE RIGHTEOUS AND PUNISH THE WICKED, IT OFTEN APPEARS AS IF THE WICKED PROSPER WHILE THE INNOCENT SUFFER.**

One of the reasons I love the Bible is because of its brutal honesty. If someone were to listen to us preach and teach about Christianity, they may think we believe that good wins out in the world. There is a belief deep down inside of us that believes good will win out and evil will be exposed, punished, and humiliated. I think we are clearly in tune with the psalmist’s belief in this.

However, if we were completely honest with ourselves, we would have to say that we don’t see it in our present world. We can look all around the world, including our country, our state, and our cities; and it appears that wicked is running unchecked and it clearly looks as if good is almost dead. Those of us who believe in God wonder why God doesn’t seem to be taking any action. As I read through this Psalm, I’m ashamed at myself that I have become dulled to all the evil. I have almost come to accept it as the norm. I don’t feel as outraged about evil as the psalmist. I have become comfortable living in this evil world.

One Sunday morning, in the middle of the worship service, the devil appeared at the front of the church. Everyone started screaming and running for the doors, trampling each other in a frantic effort to get away from the evil incarnate.

Soon everyone was evacuated from the church, except for one old man, who sat calmly in his pew, not moving … seemingly oblivious to the fact that God’s ultimate enemy was in his presence. Now this confused the devil so he walked up to the man and said, “Don’t you know who I am?”
The man replied, “Yep, I sure do.”

Satan asked, “Aren’t you afraid of me?”

“Nope, sure ain’t,” said the man.

At this point, the devil was furious. He shouted at the man, “Why aren’t you afraid of me?”

The man calmly replied, “I’ve been married to your sister for over 48 years now.”

As I read this Psalm, I’m forced to take an honest look at the world. I wonder with the psalmist in verses 1-10, “Where is God?” It seems as if THE WICKED RUN WILD; PROSPERING WHILE EXPLOITING THE POOR. It’s important to note that if King David wrote this, he was the most prosperous man in all of Israel. This is not a manifesto against rich people. In the Bible being rich doesn’t make someone evil and being poor doesn’t make one righteous. There were plenty of poor people who were evil and plenty of rich people who were righteous. This Psalm is about a group of rich and powerful people who exploited people to increase their wealth and power.

I. WHERE IS GOD? (VS 1-10)

As the poet looks at his world in verses 1-2, it seems that God appears not to care. This is an interesting way to approach God in prayer. The psalmist starts out his prayer with, “Why, LORD do You stand far off? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?” There are a couple of lies that we have to force ourselves to reject. Satan would like us to believe that either God doesn’t care about us or that God isn’t able to help us.

Let’s look at verse 2 and then we’ll come back to verse 1. The poet looks at his world and it seems as if the wicked rich and powerful are running wild; taking advantage of everyone with the simple motive of accumulating more wealth and more power. If you read the newspapers, listen to the news, or just observe what goes on in everyday life, it doesn’t take too much effort to come to the conclusion of the poet. If we look at the world as a whole, we see evil and violent people killing innocent people at an alarming rate. It seems as if one evil government replaces another. People with power, money, and weapons want to fight each other for control; while people who just want to live in peace seem always to get caught in the middle and suffer a great deal. We look at almost all the countries throughout the world and don’t see many governments and leaders who are genuinely concerned about the people they govern. It seems that the policies they make are designed to keep them in power, to increase their wealth, and to increase their control. In most countries violence is the way the powerful intimidate normal people.

I think that at this time in history, the United States is probably the best place to live but we have seen that even our politicians govern and make policies that secure their reelection. Although our government says they want to help the common person and the poor; everyone seems to be getting poorer while they and the people who put them in office continue to get richer and amass more and more power. Again let me quickly add that I am not criticizing individual politicians; it is just the nature of human government.
We look at all the violence, anger, and hatred around our country. And we can’t pick up our local newspaper without reading about a murder; over 500 last year. We see government officials talk about helping the poor and protecting the normal citizen; but all we see are politicians making promises while nothing changes for the poor.

If we were to take time to look at the injustices in the world, in our country, and in our cities; we would have to think, “What’s going on? Why doesn’t God do something?”

First of all, I don’t think that I think or feel that deeply. I’m much too focused on my own pathetic life. I think about myself, my immediate family, and all of you here at Devon Church. I have become numb to the rest. When I see the headline in the Chicago Tribune that reports a murder, I may skim the article, but not really read it or think about it. If I read that a fireman or teacher has been killed, I pay attention because we have firemen and teachers in our congregation. If I read there was a murder or other crime in our neighborhood, I read more carefully because I worry about those of you who live in these neighborhoods. But when it comes to violence around the world, I have almost become used to it and accept it as the norm for everyday life.

If I were to take some time and really look at the world, I would have to cry out just like the psalmist and say, “Where are You God? Don’t You care? What’s the deal? While evil seems to be so bold and so powerful; You seem to be absent and not so powerful. Children are being killed all over the world, all over the United States, and all over Chicago; and it appears as if You don’t care.”

I don’t know that I have ever been that honest in my prayer; have you? In verses 3-6 the songwriter goes on to describe the pride and prosperity of the wicked. I think that I have never prayed like that even when I have gone through personal suffering. I’m not sure if I just deny the reality before me, if I’m just numb to it all, or if I’m simply a good soldier and don’t question much. But for our study through this Psalm, I’m forced to face the reality of this world; namely that the wicked who have managed to amass wealth and power are not only interested in maintaining their power and wealth, but desire to amass more and more.

Verses 3 and 4 are driven by the last line in verse 4, “In all their thoughts, there is no room for God.” God is not even in their worldview. For the wicked, there is no God. They are their own gods. Doesn’t that sound a lot like our culture? There is no room for the God of the Jews and Christians in our schools, in our public discourse, or in government. There is an intentional effort by those in government and positions of power to banish God from public consciousness. Universities want us to believe that only stupid, superstitious people believe in God. The first line in verse 4 describes their arrogance. It’s because of their own pride and arrogance that they do not seek God.

The results are described in verse 3. People parade around immoral lust and encourage people, as the pop singer, Madonna says to, “Satisfy yourself.” People no longer try to control or hide their lust; they talk about it, and even brag about their immoral behavior. Those who are controlled by their lust for power often bless those who contribute money to them. There is almost no shame left in our culture. Our goal is to make people feel good about themselves no matter what they are doing. I think if we were honestly to evaluate our society, we would have to say we are in moral and ethical chaos. The Apostle John warned the early church not to get caught up in these things. Listen to what he said:
“15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If you love the world, love for the Father is not in you. 16 For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful people, the lust of their eyes and their boasting about what they have and do—comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. 18 Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour” (1 John 2:15-18 / TNIV).

My feeling is that true justice would demand these wicked people fail while those who stand fast for God would succeed and be prosperous. However, again, if we were honest, we have to say with the psalmist that these wicked people continue to succeed. The wicked seem to amass more and more money and power while the poor seem to get poorer and poorer.

Those who are wickedly rich and powerful are not even afraid of God. They have come to think of themselves as invincible. They openly and unashamedly reject God and His laws and they sneer at those who openly live for God. We should not be surprised at this. We know that things are going to get worse and worse as the world continues to reject God and His laws. In the passage I just quoted the Apostle John 2,000 years ago said the spirit of antichrist was on the move. We too can see our modern world spinning out of control.

In verses 7-10 the poet goes on to describe the values and methods of the wicked; exploitation and intimidation. The first tool of the wicked is that they lie unashamedly. The powerful use words to intimidate those with less power. We have seen bullying highlighted in our society. We know how cruel even children can be with one another. The more power people have, the more they are able to use words to confuse and intimidate people. If you were to watch politicians interviewed, each one claims the other is lying. We have seen CEO’s of major corporations lie; even to congress. I think I have become so cynical, that I’m not sure if anyone is telling the truth anymore. The poor also lie and slander; but they can’t do as much damage as those with power and wealth.

In verse 8 we see that their evil has no bounds. Whatever it takes, whoever it hurts, whatever damage it does to society and the environment; it doesn’t matter as long as they are able to maintain their power and wealth. We have seen many people killed, and disabled because someone wanted to cut corners and make some more money. We see laws enacted for the specific goal of protecting the power and wealth of a select group of people.

Verses 9-10 describe how these people are not acting out of ignorance; they plan and calculate ways in which they can exploit people and laws for their own benefit. Make no mistake about the facts despite the rhetoric; those who are wicked, rich, and powerful will continue to do whatever it takes to maintain what they have and to amass more. It really does appear that THE WICKED RUN WILD; PROSPERING WHILE EXPLOITING THE POOR.

II. A CALL TO ATTENTION (VS 11-14)

As the songwriter looks at the culture and world in which he lives, he calls for God’s attention in verses 11-14. WHEN GOD’S PEOPLE SEE THE WICKED PROSPER AND GO UNCHECKED; THEY ARE CONFUSED AND CALL OUT FOR GOD TO TAKE NOTICE OF THEIR PLIGHT. Here is where we have to be careful not to make theology based on poetry and prayer. God is not absent; He omnipresent. In other words, God is everywhere at all times. There is no place where He is not
present. Secondly, God is aware of everything going on; He is omniscient. In other words, God sees every action, knows every thought, and hears every word. Thirdly, God is able to do something; He is omnipotent. God is all powerful and able to accomplish anything. Add to that, God loves His children passionately. That is correct theology; and yet we observe evil people running wild and prospering. This confuses us since our thought is that God ought to punish the wicked and cause His children to prosper. However, as we read through the Bible; we see the opposite. It appears that the closer a person gets to God; the more likely that person is to suffer.

In verses 11 and 12, the poet asks God to take notice of the situation. Let’s just take a moment to think about the common person living in a country where a certain group of people are trying to overthrow a government. Both sides may feel that they are right; or both sides can be evil. The fight for power ends up spilling out into the community where the common person faces death and intimidation from both sides, all the food and medicine is hoarded by both forces, and often the common person has to watch their children die of sickness or starvation. This is constantly happening all over the world.

Let’s even bring this home to our country and our city. If you live in a poor neighborhood, the chances are the gangs are fighting over territory and drive-by-shootings kill many innocent children. You are fearful to even let your child go outside.

In all these situations, the common person starts to wonder why God doesn’t do something. The wicked act as if they are god and that the God we believe in is impotent to stop them. The hurtful thing for those suffering is that it seems as if these wicked people are right. The psalmist calls God to take notice. He actually calls God to stand up and take a good look. The poet begs God not to forget the helpless; those of us who are at the mercy of the ungodly rich and powerful. It is disheartening to really think that most of us are at the mercy of those who really don’t care about the common person and the poor. We really do feel helpless in this morally disintegrating world.

The psalmist goes on to further describe the attitude of arrogance in verse 13. I guess I’m a little amazed that the poets don’t go crazy or fall into depression because ultimately they have no answer to their questions. Why do the wicked prosper? I don’t know. Why do the righteous suffer? I don’t know. I know that theologians give “the free will of human beings” as the answer; and to some extent that is true. However, think about this. I’m pretty sure you can all point to a particular event in your life where you could have died; but didn’t. We would say we are thankful to God that He saved us and rescued us. Let’s say a drunk driver swerved into our lane and for some reason just missed our car. We would definitely say that God rescued us. But how about the car the drunk driver didn’t miss? Let’s say he hit the car behind us and killed a mother, father, and two children. Why didn’t God save and rescue them? I don’t know how to answer these questions. The thing about the psalmists is that they continue to go on in faith that in the ultimate sense, God punishes the wicked and rewards the righteous; even though we may not live to see it. They took a long range view of life that plays itself out over generations. For example, the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt for 400 years but after 400 years, God set the record straight; destroyed Egypt, set Israel free, and settled them safely in the Promised Land. They never deny the present situation but keep their faith in God’s power, presence, goodness, and love.

Here in verse 13 the psalmist is confused that the wicked could be so bold as to openly defy God and challenge God to stand up against them. Even in the midst of all this confusion, the psalmist
still has confidence in God as he affirms his faith in verse 14. He is confident that God hears the prayers of His people and loves them. In this evil and fallen world; God is the only hope for the poor and the common person. God cares for the disadvantaged; and as far as we are able, we are to participate in God’s love by caring for those less fortunate than we are. As we live in this broken and chaotic world, we have to hold on to right theology. God is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. God loves His children. He will reward the faithful and punish the wicked. Human beings do have free will but there is no ready or easy answer to the questions, “Why do the wicked prosper and why do the righteous suffer?” WHEN GOD’S PEOPLE SEE THE WICKED PROSPER AND GO UNCHECKED; THEY ARE CONFUSED AND CALL OUT FOR GOD TO TAKE NOTICE OF THEIR PLIGHT.

If we have not numbed ourselves to all the evil that goes on in our world, we should be as confused as the poet. I think that it’s important to have a solid faith as we go through these observations; otherwise we might go crazy. For Christians, we have a very developed theology of the afterlife. We know we will only spend a very short time in this life; but we will spend eternity in the afterlife. We know that in heaven God will wipe away every tear and right every wrong. That’s why we are able to be strong and courageous even in the midst of the moral chaos of our world.

It’s debatable how much the early Hebrews understood about the afterlife; but they certainly believed that God could choose to intervene in their situation at any time. In verses 15-18 they call God to action. GOD’S PEOPLE CALL OUT TO GOD TO JUDGE THE WICKED. The psalmist had a relatively small culture to deal with. I can’t imagine what the world would be like if all of a sudden God judged the wicked, killed them, and left the world to the righteous. Things may get even more chaotic; except for the fact that when God does do this, which could be at any moment; Jesus will first return and the righteous will have a King to lead them, rule over them, and care for them. This will be known as the Millennial Kingdom. The Hebrews did envision this period of time.

III. A CALL TO ACTION (VS 15-18)

In verses 15-16, the songwriter calls out to God to judge the wicked. In his vision of justice, the poet acknowledges that His God is YAHWEH the King forever and ever. Do you get the sense of this Millennial Kingdom ruled by God? Evil is almost always clever in hiding itself but it cannot hide from the omnipresent, omnipotent, and omniscient God. When God chooses to act against the wicked, He will break the arms of their power. They will no longer be able to harm anyone; especially those they have been exploiting. They will be called to give an account. God will publicly put them on trial and declare them guilty for each one of their acts of evil. God will expose all their hidden evil for everyone to see. Their secrets will be exposed. God will punish them. In this song, the poet describes them as being driven away from God’s land. The Christian definition of hell is when one is forever banished from the presence of God and separated from God for all eternity. At the time of God’s choosing; the wicked will be exposed, broken, judged, and punished.

As confident as he is in God’s judgment of the wicked, the poet is equally confident that God listens to and encourages His children as described in verse 17. When entering places of deep suffering in our lives, we must force ourselves to move forward in faith. God has promised us and reassured
us in the Bible that He will never leave us or forsake us; no matter what circumstances we face. We have to keep in mind that God is there. When the three Hebrews known as Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, were commanded to bow down and worship King Nebuchadnezzar, they refused. The king became enraged and told them he would throw them into the fiery furnace. Here was their answer:

“16... O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you. 17 If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God whom we serve is able to save us. He will rescue us from your power, Your Majesty. 18 But even if he doesn’t, we want to make it clear to you, Your Majesty, that we will never serve your gods or worship the gold statue you have set up” (Daniel 3:16-18 / NLT).

We know the end of the story. King Nebuchadnezzar went into a rage, heated up the furnace 7 times hotter than normal. In fact, the soldiers that threw these 3 Hebrews into the furnace killed themselves. But a fourth man appeared in the furnace. All four were walking around in the fire. When Nebuchadnezzar called the men out, their clothes were not burned, they didn’t smell like smoke, and most of all, they were totally unharmed. But the point of the story is that even if they were burned to a crisp, they were ready to die with their faith in God unmoved. There may come a time in each of our lives where we have to move forward in simple faith. As we look at all the evil in our world, we should not become discouraged. We must continue to live in faith.

We must trust in God’s heart and God’s timing. As the songwriter closes this song in verse 18, he reminds us that God will defeat the wicked. On that day when the nations of the world gather together to fight against God; God will unleash such fury against them that they will be terrified at His power and wrath. We should never lose heart because we know that God will judge the wicked and vindicate the righteous. In times of great suffering, GOD’S PEOPLE CALL OUT TO GOD TO JUDGE THE WICKED.

This was a hard sermon to first of all accept; and then to preach. The title of the sermon is “Why do the wicked prosper: Why do good people suffer?” I didn’t have an answer before I started and I still don’t have an answer; but I do know that wicked people do prosper and good people suffer. As I took time to look at our world, I clearly saw that EVEN THOUGH GOD PROMISES TO REWARD THE RIGHTEOUS AND PUNISH THE WICKED, IT OFTEN APPEARS AS IF THE WICKED PROSPER WHILE THE INNOCENT SUFFER.

There was something that took place as I studied and prepared this text to preach. I have become much more calm. Reading the newspaper made me anxious at an existential level. However, I am much more confident that even though things look very bad from my perspective; I have much more confidence in God’s power and timing. I think the words to Babbie Mason’s song “When you can’t see His hand trust His heart” express my state of being these days:

“God is too wise to be mistaken
God is too good to be unkind
So when you don’t understand
When don’t see His plan
When you can’t trace His hand
Trust His Heart.”
Lectio Divina

Psalms 10:1 (TNIV)

1 Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
2 In their arrogance the wicked hunt down the weak, catching them in the schemes they devise.
3 They boast about the cravings of their hearts; they bless the greedy and revile the Lord.
4 In their pride the wicked do not seek him; in all their thoughts there is no room for God.
5 Their ways are always prosperous; your laws are rejected by them; they sneer at all their enemies.
6 They say to themselves, “Nothing will ever shake us.”
7 Their mouths are full of lies and threats; trouble and evil are under their tongues.
8 They lie in wait near the villages; from ambush they murder the innocent.
9 Their eyes watch in secret for their victims; like a lion in cover they lie in wait.
10 They lie in wait to catch the helpless; they catch the helpless and drag them off in their nets.
11 The innocent are crushed, they collapse; they fall victim to superior strength.
12 The wicked say to themselves, “God will never notice; he covers his face and never sees.”
13 Why do the wicked revile God?
14 But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted; you consider their grief and take it in hand.
15 The victims commit themselves to you; you are the helper of the fatherless.
16 Break the arms of the wicked and the evildoers; call them to account for their wickedness that would not otherwise be found out.
17 The Lord is King for ever and ever; the nations will perish from his land.
18 You, Lord, hear the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,
defending the fatherless and the oppressed, so that mere earthly mortals will never again strike terror.

Close in prayer