
Predator, Prey, and Protector: Helping Victims Think and Act from Psalm 10

by David Powlison

Helen had been betrayed by her husband. He had played the part of the dutiful, churchgoing husband, father, and provider for many years. Their two children were in college. But unbeknownst to Helen, he had maintained mistresses in three cities. Helen had trusted him with all the family finances, including a half-million dollars she had inherited. He siphoned off all her money into his name. He spent much of it and ran up debts besides, financing a lifestyle of gambling, immorality, and partying. She'd been ignorant of the adulteries and fraud, but she was not unaware of other evils. For many years their sexual relationship had been a private agony to Helen. He routinely forced her to commit acts she found repellent. In public his demeanor was usually pleasant; he was seemingly good-natured, quick-witted, worldly-wise, successful, confident, responsible. But in private he could be ill-humored. He would berate her for minor failings and threaten her with a beating. He routinely derided her as an ignorant and incompetent female, blaming her for all problems that arose. Helen suffered in silence, until bankruptcy broke the secret life into the open. Helen professed Christ sincerely, and had sought God as her refuge amidst the low-grade sexual and verbal violence to which she was accustomed. But when everything exploded, she found her presumed refuge

insubstantial and insecure. All along, genuine faith in God as refuge had intertwined with Helen's tendencies towards keeping up appearances: "Put up with it, keep quiet, pretend it's not really happening, and everything's OK." Now she couldn't keep silent. Now she couldn't stand it any longer. Now she couldn't pretend. She was in trouble.

What should she say? How should she think? What should she do? Where does God fit amidst such devastation? Psalm 10 was uttered and written for those who have

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been victimized by others. Psalm 10 was written for Helen. It *is* a message of honest anguish and genuine refuge. It is *not* a message about pretending. It is a message about facing both reality and truth.

Ministry to Helen must help pick up many pieces. She needs the daily comfort, consolation, and encouragement of pastor and friends. She needs the church to play grace-giving hardball with her husband about his sins. (He skipped town two weeks later and moved in with one of the mistresses. He was excommunicated by the church

for his impenitence.) Helen needs legal advice. (Over the next two years her husband fought and obstructed every phase of the legal proceedings.) She needs immediate financial help, and then financial counsel about where to go from here. She needs medical advice, about whether she had contracted a sexually transmitted disease from him. She needs corporate worship: to praise God, to hear the Word of life, to participate in the Lord's Supper, to join in interceding with God. She needs counsel, to console her in grief. She needs coun-

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sel, to nourish good fruits already present: faith, buds of forgiveness and love. She needs counsel, to deal with her own sin struggles: bitterness, fear, unbelief. Most of all, Helen needs God. She needs to know that God is present, powerful, listening, just, caring, and understanding. She needs God to do something.

Psalm 10 is for Helen. It is also for the family in Sri Lanka that must live amid the constant uncertainty about where the next terrorist bombing might occur: "The bus that blew up had been packed with both explosives and ball bearings, in order to inflict terrible injuries, and it was in our section of town, not some place remote from where we drive every day." Psalm 10 is for the young man who was subjected to systematic torture, mind control, threats, and sexual violence as a child in boarding school. It is for the pastor who faces malcontents in the church who are out to get him. It is for the worker on the shop floor being persecuted for her faith because she won't join in drunkenness and immorality. It is for the college student whose professor has an ax to grind against God. It is for the family that lives in a high crime neighborhood. It is for the recent widow on whom a home-repair scam preys. It is for anyone under assault from external temptations. It is for anyone exposed to the intellectual culture or the mass media culture of this modern and post-modern age. We live in a world where a roaring lion prowls, where many people are not friends wishing your welfare, but enemies wishing to use you and harm you.

Psalm 10 guides a person into knowing God in the midst of being violated. How can Helen make these words and experiences her own? How do you make any psalm your own? Think through each psalm as a

"four-part harmony." We are easily tempted to sing solos, missing layers of significance and reservoirs of power that fill the Word of God. Join the four-part chorus; don't think that you sing or pray alone.

The Psalm's Four Voices

The first voice calls out the experience of the writer. Psalm 10 was written about 3,000 years ago. Its words burst from the heart, voice, and pen of a sufferer who called on the LORD. Yes, the truths written are universal, part of God's Word for all ages, for every nation and people. But first of all they were *personal*. This reflection and prayer was written by a man who felt abandoned, afraid, overwhelmed, and outraged in the face of evils. He and others were being hurt. But he knew God, so he thought and worked through his experience in living relationship to Him. This psalm does not simply contain ideas about evil and hurt, about God's lovingkindness and power. The ideas arise in heartfelt conversation with that Person who is good and powerful. Helen has the privilege of listening in on someone else's heart, someone else's processing of events, someone else's conversation.

A second voice sounds the experience of the people of God through all ages. Israel and the church have *suffered together* in this fallen, adversarial world. Your individual experience does not occur alone. You are part of a larger whole, God's new society. The Lord—Yahweh, Jesus—is the hope of all the afflicted, all the poor in spirit, all the needy. You are part of a vast company who have made and are making this psalm their own. You can join in with countless others. You don't have to work up faith all on your own. You are part of a choir, and sometimes others can carry the tune while you catch your breath. Helen joins all God's people in the experience of suffering.

The third voice registers Jesus' experience. He Himself cried out these requests to God, offered these analyses of evil, and asserted these affirmations of faith that fill Psalm 10. These sentiments express a facet of the experience of the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Your Redeemer was among the afflicted, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. Your individual experience is the subset of another's experience, if you are *in Christ*. Hear and see the One who invites your trust, gratitude, love, and hope. He walked this road. Imagine, these words reveal the heart of your Rescuer. You can love the Jesus who felt, thought, and said these things. Psalms are not meditative techniques for achieving mental equilibrium. Psalm 10 not spiritual Prozac. It expresses the inner life and words of a Person whom Helen can grow to love.

Finally, *you*, the readers, weigh in with the fourth

voice. These words are meant to map onto your experience; your experience is meant to be expressed with these words. Helen's experience can be mapped and expressed in ways she'd never think of herself. The Word of God—words of the psalmist, of believers, of Jesus—comes to change us.

What does Psalm 10 say in particular? It contains two sorts of things: honest, aggrieved requests and thoughtful analysis. At the beginning and end, the aggrieved person bluntly talks to God: "Why are you far away? Bring to justice those who hurt others. Get up and do something. You see what's going on. Sufferers trust You because You've helped the helpless in the past. Strip the power away from the hurtful now. I know You hear what I want. I know You will listen and make things right." In the middle, the sufferer vividly describes people who harm others. He probes how evil-doers think and act and their effect on innocent victims. People who harm *people* are also rebelling against *God*, serving their pride and cravings. They terrorize those they victimize. They will be destroyed.

Psalm 10 unfolds in four movements: a cry of desolation, a blunt assessment of predatory people, a cry of reliance on God, a confident affirmation. Here are the details.¹

I. Opening Cry: "Where Are You?" (verse 1)

Why do you stand far off, O Lord? Why do you hide in times of trouble?

Where *are* You? Where *were* You? Often this is the heart's first cry and first question: "You have said that You love me, that You are a refuge and shield for the afflicted. So why do You seem absent, at the very point of my anguish, powerlessness, and violation? Where are You? Why don't I know Your protection? Why is evil unrestrained?" A sense of abandonment and isolation often dominates the first reactions of sufferers.

This is a cry of faith. Knowing that God *does* come near, that You are a refuge in trouble, that You help the helpless, why do You seem so far away now? Jesus said words almost identical to this, as His faith expressed its anguish: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46). You are in the company of one who both knows God and has felt abandoned in trouble.

Let's be clear about something. People can ask ques-

¹The translation that appears is largely from the New American Standard Bible (1997). I have made several minor alterations, breaking compound sentences into shorter sentences, and changing "mischief" to "trouble" in verses 7 and 14. The only substantial change is in the second half of verse 2, which is discussed in footnote 3.

tions like this from two fundamentally different stances. For some people, those who walk in the footsteps of this psalm, the questions express a cry of faith and need that looks to God. In trouble, they *want* God, but feel overwhelmed and isolated. But for other people, it expresses a cry of unbelief, hatred, and accusation. In trouble, they *blame* God. During the initial gust of emotion it may not always be clear which stance predominates. There may be mixed motives. Helen groped

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in God's direction, half unbelieving, actively wondering at times if God wasn't a figment of her imagination and the habits of her upbringing: "I believe, help my unbelief." But over time it always becomes clear whether the anguished sense of God's distance is fundamentally processed through faith or through pride and unbelief. Psalm 10:1 speaks intimately and directly: "you... O LORD... you." It speaks, amid the desolation, of trust in the Lord who is great, not contempt for a god who seems impotent and uncaring.

II. Analyze Harmful People: "They Are Proud, Willful, Godless, and Predatory" (verses 2-11)

In pride the wicked burn, pursuing the afflicted.

No psalm gives a fuller description of the thought processes, actions, and emotions of those who hurt others. The afflicted man spent time thinking about and describing the kind of person who uses, misuses, and abuses others. He spells out the reasons for his upset, and the inner workings of those who harm him. Why? It helps to describe exactly what you are up against. Hurtful people are self-ruled and self-exalting: "proud." They are consumed with and by the things they do to others: they "burn."² This burning describes the arousal of any evil desire. It captures vividly the flame of violence and anger that pursues its victims. Even at the mildest level—verbal degradation of another—a dark passion operates, seeking another's harm:

²This is a difficult sentence to translate. It either means "the wicked *burn after* the afflicted" or "the wicked *burn* the afflicted." In the first case it describes the hostility and passion of harmful people. In the second case it describes the hurt and fear that sufferers experience. Either is consistent with the rest of Scripture: the harmful set about to cause pain to the hurting. I will take it in the first sense, following this translation.

“You stupid !@#\$\$% jerk! Can’t you do anything right? I don’t know why you take up space on this planet. You waste good air breathing and waste good food eating. You are useless scum, and I wish you’d never been born.” (Quotation, edited to make it less vile, spoken by a father to his 13-year-old son after he made a simple mistake while working in the family hardware store.) More extreme violence rages with the same fire. The burning can also be sexual: the lust of the powerful fixates on and seizes the powerless. The burning can be financial: the single-minded pursuit of a scam or theft. Evildoers exalt themselves and their own agenda. Wrongdoers pursue perceivedly helpless or weak persons: the “afflicted.” In each case, someone with power—or pretensions to power—picks on the relatively powerless to further his or her own self-interest. Evil seeks out victims.

They [the afflicted] are caught in the plots which they [the wicked] have devised.³

We usually associate “plots” with political conspiracy. But it vividly describes the fact that people *think about* using and abusing others. They follow the “devices” of their hearts, a line of behavior that they construct. They pursue a plan of action: schemes and plots. Violence and betrayal are not accidental, but devised. Helen’s husband did not accidentally commit adultery and steal money. He set out to do things guaranteed to destroy her marital and financial well-being.

For the wicked boasts of his heart’s desire. The greedy man curses and spurns the Lord.

Again, the analysis of evil-doers lays them bare. They do what they want, serve what they want, follow what they want, delight in what they want, glory in what they want. If Helen’s husband desires to hurt her, to humiliate her in comparison to him, to subject her to sexual demands, or to plunder her of money and goods, he “worships” what he wants. Those who do evil things are not “sick,” except in a metaphorical sense. They are *wicked* and live for instinctive and well-practiced cravings.

Notice that to serve self-centered desire means pointedly *not* to serve the Lord, to spurn and despise God. Users, misusers, and abusers of other people are simultaneously rebels against God. Theirs is an “anti-

repentance.” They turn *from* the Lord of life, and *to* their greed. The sufferer’s plight reveals the fact that those who cause suffering have a problem with God. Something bigger is going on behind Helen’s particular miseries.

The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him. All his thoughts are, “There is no God.”

Imagine living inside a mind in which there are zero thoughts about God—except for the thought that “God doesn’t matter”! The stream of plans, memories, con-

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siderations, assessments, anticipations, attitudes, reactions...is devoid of God’s will, God’s judgment, God’s mercy, God’s lordship. Such a person is utterly self-willed, haughty. A person who seeks only what he instinctively craves is by definition “wicked.” Helen’s husband simply and consistently pursued his own agenda, without thought for what that agenda looked like to the One who holds his life in the balance. The writer reminds himself and God what such people are really like. It helps a sufferer to know what he or she is up against. It helps me to know that those who oppress *me* have really got a problem with *God*. It helps in bringing the problem to God as a matter of God’s concern. This psalm not only calls God into the life of the sufferer as a source of hope and refuge; it considers victimizers vis-à-vis God. Hard, clear thought informs living faith that will call out to God.

His ways prosper at all times. Your judgments are on high, out of his sight. As for his adversaries, he snorts at them. He says to himself, “I shall not be moved; throughout all generations I shall not be in adversity.”

Users seem to “get away with it”—in the short run. Their ways apparently “prosper,” leaving misery in their wake. While Helen picks up the pieces, her husband runs off with a job, money, girlfriend, freedom, and self-righteous superiority to small-minded, churchy busybodies: “I shall not be moved.” God’s judgment seems remote, irrelevant. Those who would oppose bad behavior are mocked as impotent adversaries. Violators think, “My life works, and nobody can stop me from doing what I’m doing. I’ll never reap any

³This is the one place I have departed from the NASB, which has “Let them [the wicked] be caught in the plots which they have devised.” The Hebrew could either be further description of the wicked (as I have taken it) or a request to God that they reap what they sowed. Either is consistent with the rest of Scripture. A call for the wicked to reap what they sow occurs later in the psalm and will be discussed in Section III.

negative consequences." Helen's husband can skip town, set up housekeeping in the next state, and never look back—he thinks.

This presumption of the wicked is a given, of course; it is wired into the wicked act itself. If violators of others ever seriously thought about God, or justice, or the needs of others, they would not do what they do! Neither fear nor love hinders their self-centeredness. Helen can be significantly aided by understanding the thought processes of wickedness. For example, a good dose of understanding the workings of evil helps keep her from doing the same. It keeps her relying on God rather than blaming God. It keeps her moral compass rightly aligned, keeps good and evil straight. Notice that even in analyzing evil, the sufferer talks *to* God: *Your* judgments are remote to those who think they can get away with it.

This internal logic of evil will be explicitly turned on its head when it comes to asking God for help in the third section of the psalm. Evil ways will not prosper, despite what the perpetrators think; God's judgments will come right down to where we live and into sight; evil-doers will be rocked with adversity.

His mouth is full of curses and deceit and oppression; under his tongue is trouble and wickedness.

Listen to how such people talk. Their words damn, deceive, and oppress. This sentence catalogues the ways that people lie, intimidate, mislead, and overwhelm others. It's what the wicked are about. They are "full" of what then overflows. Something "under the tongue" is ready to use at a moment's notice. The psalm gives categories, not specifics; it invites you to fill in the details.

Psalm 10 speaks exclusively from the standpoint of the innocent victim who relies on God. But sufferers must also honestly ask themselves the question, "Am I more like my oppressor than I realize or want to admit? Does God find bitterness and falsehood in me also? Are there ways I also think, plan, and act as if there is no God? Does my reaction to evil reveal my own evil, or a living faith?"⁴ In fact, the apostle Paul cites Psalm 10:7 to raise this humbling question (Rom. 3:14). The second half of Romans 3 wraps up a lengthy, direct challenge to every human being. Paul carefully removes any pretense that you are better than others, convicts every one of us of sin, and convinces us that our standing with God depends on what Jesus did. "Are we any better than they are? There is none righteous, not even one.

⁴In many psalms that lament suffering and cry for deliverance, the sufferer also confesses his own sins: 25, 38, 40, 69, 143.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." The fair punishment for sin is capital punishment. Jesus took what I deserve. The only true innocent was strapped into the electric chair in place of the guilty: "propitiation in His blood" (Rom. 3:25).⁵

Here is how Helen eventually put this into her experience. "I did not do the hateful things my husband did, to the praise of God's grace. But I spent years in tight-

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lipped bitterness. I played the aggrieved victim-door-mat, and I see how my pride fed the self-righteousness and self-pity of that role. I have fantasized vengeance at times—even murder. Part of my silence over the years, and all of my pretending, came from living for my social reputation. I gave romantic fantasies air time in my mind. I often took refuge in junk food rather than in God. My husband often intimidated and manipulated me; in those ways I was a victim. But at other times cowardice and the easy way out shaped my choices. Yes, my husband sinned in dreadful ways that continue to bring hardship into my life. But the living mercy of Jesus to me for my sins has enabled me to face what he did with a growing measure of mercy, and with a real gratitude to God that I never imagined possible. I have come to know God's love, as refuge from both my sufferings and my sins."

He sits in the lurking places of the villages. In the hiding places he kills the innocent. His eyes stealthily watch for the unfortunate. He lurks in a hiding place as a lion in his lair. He lurks to catch the afflicted. He catches the afflicted when he draws him into his net. He crouches, he bows down, and the unfortunate fall by his mighty ones.⁶

Evildoers "lurk." What a vivid way to put it! They are predatory. They are stalkers, literal or figurative. They don't live out in the open. They conceal what they do, creeping low to the ground like a hunting lion, seek-

⁵Paul does not ignore the suffering of the innocent victim who loves God. He discusses this at great length in the second half of Romans 8, quoting Psalm 44, another psalm of affliction, in 8:36. He embeds our sufferings in God's larger purposes.

⁶"Mighty ones" might well allude to the claws and fangs of the lion as it rips, kills, and feeds on its prey.

ing to trap the innocent. Of course, with respect to God, none of us are innocents; of course, all of us must wrestle with the sinfulness of returning evil for evil. But on the human-to-human level, there *are* innocents and unfortunates. The psalm writer is not afraid to camp out on that fact in a vivid, terrifying description: predators lurk to harm the prey. Power crushes and uses weakness.

*The Lord misses nothing.
He does not and will not forget.*

Helen was an innocent. A husband whose wife is volatile, abusive, and irresponsible is an innocent. Children who are molested, beaten, abandoned or mocked are innocents. Aging parents whose children neglect them, steal from them, or threaten them are innocents. Victims of racism or auto theft or religious persecution are innocents. Jesus was an innocent, given into the lion's jaws. None of these deserves what he gets from the hands of "man who is of the earth." You are meant to cry out, "Unfair! Outrageous! Abomination! Unjust!" And as you ponder these words about lurking evil, you are also meant to feel the hair stand up on the back of your neck. Evil terrifies and intimidates. Evil is strong; the innocent are weak.⁷

He says to himself, "God has forgotten. He has hidden His face. He will never see it."

People who cause harm really think they'll never be called to account. They really think no one sees what they do behind closed doors. Helen's husband really thought his mistresses and financial shenanigans could be kept out of sight.

He believed a lie.

III. Cry to God: "Act to Aid the Hurting" (verses 12-15)

Arise, O Lord. O God, lift up your hand. Do not forget the afflicted.

The voice that initially said "God is distant" now asks God to be near. The voice that then rehearsed trouble now begs that trouble get dealt with. This God can "rise" and "lift His hand": He has power to act. This

⁷This psalm is not for those whose sense of "brokenness" primarily arises from their own thwarted lusts. It is for those who are truly "poor in spirit" and need God.

God can remember—and do something. The wicked may think that God is nonexistent, or has forgotten, or doesn't care, or is powerless. They may think God will never act. Believing sufferers may wonder (verse 1), but they rely on God. The afflicted call on God to notice, remember, and do something. The previous ten verses communicated a dark world where the utter self-centeredness of the predatory produces bleak fear in the prey. That world begins to crack open. Terrifying light begins to dawn on the tiny, self-absorbed mind of the wicked. Delightful light begins to dawn into the frightening, hurtful world of the afflicted. Jesus' words in Luke 18:1-8 reflect on these realities: if a cynical judge can be hassled into protecting an innocent, how much more will God act as the protector of His chosen ones who cry to Him day and night? But will Jesus find people who call on Him? Helen can call on the living God. She can seek Him. Seekers find. Askers receive. The Lord misses nothing. He does not and will not forget.

Why has the wicked spurned God? He has said to himself, "You will not require it." You have seen it, for You have beheld trouble and vexation to take it into Your hand.

God will take matters into His own hands. The wicked may think what they like, that God can be safely ignored, that they can live for whatever they want. But God *has seen* the hurt and turmoil that they inflict on others. He *takes note* of it. He *will do* something. The dark threat thrives on concealment and the powerlessness of its victims. But it is completely visible to God, and must reckon with a greater power. All the preceding analysis of the thought processes and actions of evildoers is not theoretical. Here the data is presented to God in urgent need and trust: You see, You judge good and evil, You act. As Helen accurately interprets her husband, and the ways he has misrepresented reality to himself, she intercedes with God intelligently and forcefully.

The unfortunate commits himself to You. You have been the helper of the orphan.

Sufferers look to the Lord as the only real source of help. The weak and helpless trust. God has been the helper of the helpless. He must become such again. This is no theoretical God, no set of religious feelings or fine ideas, no highfalutin' doctrines disconnected from everyday, needy people. This is real need seeking a real helper. Helen can abandon herself to God.

These sentences put the plight of the sufferer in very strong words. The "unfortunate" might best be described by the term "a hurting person." The "orphan" is the extreme form of the helpless, needy, for-

lorn, bereft. We might paraphrase, "The hurting commits himself to You. You have been the helper of the utterly needy." What do the needy need? Many forms of help may be timely. The church of Christ, when alive to God, has always demonstrated a lively social conscience. The church can help Helen in many practical ways. And it is a good thing that American society fosters a degree of social conscience. The legal system can help her find a measure of justice, protection, and recompense from her husband. Mercy ministries, social work, and advocacy for the powerless, poor, and disenfranchised are good things. But Psalm 10 drives home a bigger issue. The hurting need You. First and finally, the needy need You. God runs His universe to ensure that in an evil world, no merely human advocacy can redress the full need.⁸ Consider Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the life of faith: "into Your hand I commit my spirit" and "for the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, thinking little of the shame." Profound suffering needs one who will "wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (Rev. 21:4).

Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer. Seek out his wickedness until You find none.

This is a cry for God to make evil ineffectual: a broken arm can't do anything. This is a cry for God to utterly destroy evil: there's no more to be found. The helper of the weak is the destroyer of the abusive. The very arm that once "caught" the afflicted will be snapped in two. The very mind, tongue, and actions of "wickedness" will be annihilated. Here is a profound irony. The wrongdoer thinks that the Lord "will not seek out" his sins ("require," 10:13). But the sufferer calls on God to "seek out sins until they can't be found" because they have been obliterated.

Abusers think, "God won't require it," God won't seek out what they've done and bring it back on their heads. But when God acts, evildoers reap what they sow. What goes around comes around. The sufferer asks God to bring on the logical consequences: the arm that broke another will be broken. It will happen. Throughout the Bible, the consequences of an evil course of action have a certain appropriateness. The punishment

⁸In Helen's case, for example, the church did a wonderful job. That is what ought to occur, though it is not always the case. Sufferers can still find hope and God's particular grace, even in situations of unalleviated persecution, when there are no social resources either in the church or in the wider society. Part of the impact of Corrie ten Boom's *The Hiding Place* (both book and movie) arises from the comfort of God in a situation where normal social supports (except friendship) have been destroyed.

fits the crime. For example, David was immoral, deceitful, and murderous. In consequence, immorality, deceit, and violence stained his family. After Amnon seduced his half-sister, Tamar, her brother, Absalom, conspired to murder him. Absalom stole away the hearts of the people, used his father's concubines, and attempted to kill his father (1 Sam. 11-16). When Israel turned to the idol gods of the surrounding nations, she came under the political power of those nations (Judges 2-16). Sufferers want fairness and justice.

But again, remember that this is a cry of faith, not pride. These are not the words of a vigilante. If I play vigilante, vengeance-seeker, vindictive one, I assume that my own reactions must remedy evils, or that evils against me personally must be remedied by God right now. Faith trusts God's wrath in a different way. This is the cry of the weak one who trusts the Strong One, the hurting person who trusts the one who will make it all better. Helen can let go of her bitterness at her husband. She can refuse to play tit-for-tat during the legal proceedings. She can let go of the years of darkness, secrets, fear, and shame. She can trust someone else to make all wrongs right, and can get on with life. The wrath of God is a central piece of the hope of God's people.⁹

IV. Confident Affirmation: "The Lord Will Right Wrongs" (verses 16-18)

The Lord is King forever and ever. Nations have perished from His land.

This psalm ends with quiet confidence. The initial dismay, the sense of dark threat, the cries for help, these end up in affirmations. God is a person with a name—Yahweh, I AM THAT I AM—who rules forever. He has proved it in history, destroying the Hivites, Perizzites,

⁹"Fire and brimstone" have fallen into disrepute—and often neglect—in part because they are too often only one-third understood, thus only one-third preached (either with a threatening edge or with sidestepping apologies). Yes, God delivers a *dreadful warning to the ungodly*. Helen's husband should be afraid. But, destruction of evil is also consistently presented in Scripture as the Lord's *loving rescue of His own people* from torment at the hands of their enemies. As such, it generates great hope amid affliction. Helen should long for the day when misery and pain will be no more, when what causes it will be destroyed. This is not inconsistent with forgiving her husband, praying for his repentance, and loving her enemy; to do anything else would be to usurp God's right to judge (Romans 12:14-21). And judgment is also presented as God's *demonstration of His own glory and righteousness*, prompting wonder and rejoicing in those who love Him. Helen will one day marvel at the God who brings her full and final relief. (See in context the fire and brimstone of Genesis 19:24; Psalm 11:6; Ezekiel 38:22; Revelation 14:10, 20:10; cf., 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 and 2 Peter 2:6-10.)

Hittites, and the rest. Sufferers call on a God who has previously annihilated evildoers and idolaters. What has been points to what will be. This King is now known even more fully. The Lord is Jesus, before whom every knee shall bow. He has redeemed the nations—Helen included—by perishing in the place of His elect. But those who reject Him will cry, “Mountains, fall on us!” in terror at their impending destruction.

Where do sufferers bank their hopes? This is a heart-searching question with a heart-calming answer. The first half of this statement is quoted in the New Testament: “The Lord will reign forever and ever” (Rev. 11:15). Christ wins; evil loses. This is the indestructible foundation for human hopes, even when our schemes for earthly joy are shattered by sufferings.

*These inward trials I design,
From sin and self to set thee free,
To break thy schemes for earthly joy,
That thou may'st find thy all in Me.*

—John Newton

Psalm 10 is not about some glib happiness and placid contentment. It is about hope in the midst of abandonment and fear, for those in desperate need for help. But walking this road, at day's end and prayer's end, you “find thy all in Me.”

Here, too, the great divide among sufferers becomes obvious. The psalm writer, all God's people, Jesus, and Helen bank their hopes in the right place, and come out in the right place. Other sufferers break when their schemes for earthly joy are broken; they come out vindictive, addicted, embittered, immoral, unbelieving, and greedy. The Lord will reign with His people; idolaters will perish.

O Lord, You have heard the desire of the afflicted.

Victims want many things: protection, relief, vindication, justice, and hope. The Lord hears such desires, for they reflect God's own intention. Hearing, He will act. God is the righteous Judge who hears the cry of His chosen ones who suffer at the hands of others (Luke 18:1-8). But will the Lord find faith on the earth when He comes? Will afflicted ones in fact rest their hopes on Him? Are you in fact the “poor in spirit,” one who knows your need and brings it to the Lord? Psalms never vindicate victims who would themselves act like the wicked, plotting vengeance, thinking that “there is no God.” The afflicted are trusters, refugees, asylum-seekers, believers, who cry to the personal God on whom they rely.

What an amazing contrast appears here. We saw earlier that the wicked “boasts of his heart's desire.” He is arrogant, autonomous, demanding. But “the desire of the afflicted is heard” because it is aligned with the

will and purposes of the loving God. “This is the confidence which we have before Him, that, if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests which we have asked from Him” (1 John 5:14f). Thomas Watson once commented that “desires are the soul and life of prayer.”¹⁰ It can

*If you “suffer in a Godward direction,”
He gives you hope.*

equally be said that desires are the soul and life of wickedness. Understanding the difference is life for the soul!

Helen, committing herself to the Lord, can bring her anguish to One who hears.

You will strengthen their heart.

God acts in the first place to strengthen sufferers internally. If you “suffer in a Godward direction,” He gives you hope: you are not abandoned. He gives you hope: your sufferings and cries have been heard and will be taken very seriously. It is precisely in the context of suffering that God Himself strengthens hearts in many ways. Sufferers need to know *how* God does this, *what* He is up to. The love of God pours out directly into the hearts of afflicted persons who learn to rely on Him in hope (Rom. 5:3-5). God becomes directly *known*—“seen”—in ways previously unimaginable (Job 42:5). Our foolishness is revealed, so that we might seek and receive growing wisdom directly from God (James 1:2-5). We are remade into the image of Jesus, and established in the love of God (Rom. 8:29, in the context of 8:18-39). We learn to trust and obey Jesus, who walked the exacting path of unjust suffering *ahead* of us and who walks it *with* us (Heb. 4:14-5:9 and 12:1-11). Our self-centered cravings are revealed, like dross boiled to the surface of a refiner's vat, and our faith is purified and simplified (1 Pet. 1:3-15). Helen quails in the face of betrayal, with its ramifications for her marriage, identity, finances, health, reputation. God can strengthen her heart. She can become settled. As she learns to think with Psalm 10 clarity and ask with Psalm 10 directness, she will find substantial joys emerging out of nightmare and disintegration.

Here as elsewhere, Jesus is the pioneer. His experience during His passion began with sorrow, betrayal,

¹⁰Cited in Charles Spurgeon's *Treasury of David* regarding this verse.

and abandonment:

- "Father, let this cup pass from Me";
- the silence of a lamb before its shearers;
- "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?";
- "I am thirsty."

This sufferer loved His enemies through it all, as each of us is called to do:

- "Today you will be with Me in paradise";
- "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing";
- "Woman, behold your son....Behold your mother."

It wrapped up in commitment and hope:

- "It is finished";
- "Into Your hands I commit My spirit."

Faith finds God in suffering, enables endurance under suffering, produces love amidst suffering, and anchors hope through suffering. Jesus walked Psalm 10 ahead of us.

Psalm 10 plays oboe and minor key in the symphony of the gospel. It is one part in the larger whole, one piece of the experience of each God-centered sufferer.

You will incline Your ear to vindicate the orphan and the oppressed, so that man who is of the earth will no longer cause terror.

God not only strengthens hearts in the midst of suffering, He also acts to destroy the powers of harm and terror. The fundamentally weak and poor will be vindicated by God. Yes, some people terrorize, intimidate, and use others. Helen's husband covered most of the bases of evil-doing. But such terrorists will be destroyed, some sooner, some later, all sooner or later.

What a marvelous affirmation and promise closes this psalm: "That man who is of the earth may cause terror no more." People are fundamentally weak—mere clay, morning mist, day lilies. An evildoer has a moment of power to hurt, but the God who is fundamentally strong will have the final say. That hope animates "groans within ourselves" that everything will someday be renewed (Rom. 8:23). Alongside, the Holy Spirit "intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." We will be delivered from all sin and misery. Every tear will be wiped away when evil is no more (Rev. 20).

* * * *

Application: Make This Your Own

Read the psalm as a whole, turning it into your own words and thoughts.

*Why do you stand far off, O Lord?
Why do you hide in times of trouble?
In pride the wicked burn, pursuing the afflicted.*

*They are caught in the plots which they have devised.
For the wicked boasts of his heart's desire.
The greedy man curses and spurns the Lord.
The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does
not seek Him.*

*All his thoughts are, "There is no God."
His ways prosper at all times.
Your judgments are on high, out of his sight.
As for his adversaries, he snorts at them.
He says to himself, "I shall not be moved;
throughout all generations I shall not be in adversity."
His mouth is full of curses and deceit and oppression;
under his tongue is trouble and wickedness.
He sits in the lurking places of the villages.
In the hiding places he kills the innocent.
His eyes stealthily watch for the unfortunate.
He lurks in a hiding place as a lion in his lair.
He lurks to catch the afflicted.
He catches the afflicted when he draws him into his net.
He crouches, he bows down,
and the unfortunate fall by his mighty ones.
He says to himself, "God has forgotten.
He has hidden His face. He will never see it."
Arise, O Lord. O God, lift up your hand.
Do not forget the afflicted.
Why has the wicked spurned God?
He has said to himself, "You will not require it."
You have seen it, for You have beheld trouble and vexa-
tion to take it into Your hand.
The unfortunate commits himself to You.
You have been the helper of the orphan.
Break the arm of the wicked and the evildoer.
Seek out his wickedness until You find none.
The Lord is King forever and ever.
Nations have perished from His land.
O Lord, You have heard the desire of the afflicted.
You will strengthen their heart.
You will incline Your ear to vindicate the orphan and the
oppressed,
so that man who is of the earth will no longer cause terror.*

I. Opening Cry: "Where Are You?" (verse 1)

1. Talk to God. Talk out loud. Even talk loudly. Many sufferers stay submerged in their thoughts and feelings, and never break out into conversation. Too often sufferers stifle spoken prayer. Prayer means asking someone for help. Too often "prayer" is vague, indistinguishable from thought life. "God" becomes blended with chaotic mental processes, rather than existing as a distinct person. But God is a person. Talk to Him. Jesus prayed out loud and with feeling: "He offered up prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of

His piety" (Heb. 5:7). Don't stifle words. Cry out.

2. Psalm 22 walks over similar ground as Psalm 10, capturing in even greater detail the riches of relationship between a sufferer and his God, who seems far away in the moment of pain. It is even more explicitly Jesus' experience. After making Psalm 10 your own, do the same with Psalm 22. There is no rush. God will meet you in the integrity of your real life experience. At the end of a long life in which many sorrows and dangers had produced many psalms, David summarized his relationship to God this way: "As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my life from all distress" (1 Kings 1:29).

3. The psalms are intended for use by groups of people, as well as by individuals. Cries for help are corporate as well as private. Who can pray with you? You are not alone. God does not intend you to fully resolve your struggles even in private with Him. Go join the people of God in a small group setting where your needs can be presented to God by others.

4. Matthew 26-27, Mark 14-15, Luke 22-23, and John 18-19 tell a story of betrayal, abandonment, torture, mockery, grief, and desolation. Jesus not only experienced sufferings like yours, He experienced evil in *greater concentration*. In fact, He did it *for* you, and He did it *on purpose*. And His *cry was answered*, as God delivered Him in power: Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, John 20-21. Read a different version of the story each day. Think about these things.

II. Analyze Harmful People: "They are proud, willful, godless, and predatory" (verses 2-11)

1. Have you suffered? Are you suffering? Have you been "burned" because someone else "burned" to do you wrong?

- Have you been verbally attacked, mocked, humiliated, denigrated, treated with contempt, slandered?
- Have you been sexually manipulated, molested, seduced, raped, assaulted, forced to participate?
- Have you been financially victimized, scammed, ripped off, burglarized, or robbed?
- Have you been physically threatened, stalked, attacked, cuffed, beaten, terrorized, or tortured?
- Have you been a victim of prejudice regarding race, age, gender, ethnic background, economic status, physical disability, or religious commitment?
- Have you faced a confluence of various evils? One person can assault another in many ways. Helen's husband picked from the category "all of the above."

Describe accurately what has happened to you: who,

what, when, where, how, why. Talk it out with God in some detail, according to the pattern of Psalm 10.

2. We are usually most aware of what wrongdoers *do*, because that directly affects us. What does Psalm 10 say about how they *think*, what they *want*, what they *worship*, what they do *with God*? They think they can do what they do with impunity. How does recognizing the Godward dimension of how they live help you when you experience the sting of their actions? Victimizers act against people *and* God. How does that make you less alone in what you suffer?

3. How have you also sinned? Have you criticized, lusted, stolen, threatened, or been prejudiced? Do you lose sight of God, and sink into unbelief? How do your sins against God and man come out in reaction to being sinned against? Remember that God has transformative purposes in the sufferings of those who love Him.

4. What has Jesus Christ done to save sinners? Study 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 for the condensed version: Jesus has dealt both with sin's death penalty and with sin's perverse mastery. Study Romans 3:9-6:23 for the detailed version. Read Sinclair Ferguson's *The Christian Life* (Banner of Truth) for a full-orbed treatment of what Jesus did, does, and will do for us. You have been given an inexpressibly wonderful gift, the best, and nothing can take it away. No suffering can separate you from God's love: Romans 8:18-39.

III. Cry to God: "Act to aid the hurting" (verses 12-15)

1. What will Jesus Christ do to unrepentant sinners who cause pain to God's children? Study 1 Thessalonians 1:6-10 and 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 for the condensed version: the death penalty will be inflicted on those who do not love Christ's grace, and who hurt those who do love grace. Study Revelation for the uncut version.

2. Talk *to* God. Talk out loud. Even talk loudly. But don't babble. Talk intelligently, based on an understanding of God's reign of power and grace that deals with evil and suffering. Many sufferers simply grope and writhe in inarticulate pain and confusion. Jesus prayed knowing exactly what He was saying, focused on obeying the will of the Father: "My Father, if possible, let this cup pass from Me. Yet not as I will but as You will." (Matt. 26:39). He modeled the very things He had earlier taught His disciples to pray (Matt. 6:9-13). Don't whine or grumble. Don't replay a broken record. Don't fall into the superstition of using fine-sounding religious phrases. Don't name and claim, thinking that your words pry goodies out of heaven. Don't think that piety can't ask for anything specific, but contents itself with generalities. Pray direct, articulate prayers pursuing God's will and glory. Psalm 10 guides you.

3. Ask God to act: "Destroy evil and promote good." Prayer is not about working up some state of mind, though prayer does affect our state of mind, as Psalm 10 illustrates. Prayer goes to Someone you love and trust, asking for action and confessing faith.

IV. Confident Affirmation: "The Lord Will Right Wrongs" (verses 16-18)

1. What is simply true that you need to affirm? Where can you camp out, finding calm, strength, hope, and comfort? Begin where Psalm 10 begins. What else can you put in your confession of faith in the midst of trouble?

2. Ponder this statement of faith from the sixteenth century Heidelberg Catechism:

What is your only comfort in life and in death?

That I am not my own, but belong—

body and soul,

in life and in death—

to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood,

and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil.

He also watches over me in such a way

that not a hair can fall from my head

without the will of my Father in heaven;

in fact, all things must work together for my salvation.

Because I belong to him,

Christ, by his Holy Spirit,

assures me of eternal life

and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

If you grasped these things with your whole heart, how would it affect the way you handle sufferings?

3. David suffered creatively and redemptively. Remember that a *sufferer* wrote this psalm. He turned his experience into words that have brought hope and guidance to countless people for three thousand years. Can you turn your experience into a poem of hope? Can you turn your experience into a ministry of reaching out to others who suffer? "God comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction" (2 Cor. 1:4).

Summary

Psalm 10 walks out ahead of us, teaching us to think clearly and to fervently seek help from where help really comes. You need to THINK about what has happened. What is the perpetrator of evil like? Who has mistreated you? What have they done? How do they think? What are they doing with God (not just with you)? Get a clear bead on evil even though it's painful

and frightening. Since evildoers are often successful and deceitful (verses 5 and 7), they can be hard to identify. Often the first people they deceive are their victims. Clear thinking clears the head. See your danger for what it is.

You need to SEEK help. This help comes first and finally from the living God. He hears, helps, strengthens, and vindicates those who rely on Him. If you look anywhere else first—to your own powers of vengeance,

God has transformative purposes in the sufferings of those who love Him.

self-protection, or escape; to the aid that other human beings offer—then you will set yourself up for a fall. You will get snared in bitterness and revenge (spurning God for *your* pride). You will flee in avoidance and addiction (spurning God for *your* false refuges and comforts). You will develop a perverted dependency on other people (spurning God for *your* trust in man). Sadly, our culture has awakened countless people to think about what evildoers ("abusers," in the catchword) have done to them. But it has cast them upon their own resources as "abuse victims." Failing to promote faith in God, bad counsel ("All his thoughts are, 'There is no God'") must promote faith in something or someone else—with harmful results. But victims can properly understand their own sins and sufferings, and God's grace. They can learn the faith of Psalm 10 and find the wellspring of hope, mercy, and courage in dealing with evildoers.

As you seek the Lord, then you will find that many secondary helps contribute to the overall process. There is a place to call the police, file a class action suit, press criminal charges, pursue church discipline, seek counseling, weep with a friend, visit a lawyer, get financial advice, look for a job, talk to a realtor, and so forth. God is not a private refuge who shuts down recourse to other helps (as Helen had assumed for many years). The Lord is a refuge who leads us to rightly appropriate the many sub-redeemers who can play a part in our lives—and to play a part for good in others' lives, as well. As Helen learns to think about evil and beseech God, she will also learn to participate in the community of God's people in a rich, immediate way. She'll have things to offer other sufferers down the road—a heart that has learned to think and pray Psalm 10, for example (a 2 Corinthians 1:4 "comfort in any affliction"). What her husband *meant* for evil (let's pull no punches), God meant and works for good.