

D. Psalm 10 – Sonship and Imprecation

The *already-but-not-yet* present state of God’s renewal in Christ means that the Christian’s sonship exists in a circumstance of imperfection – not only in terms of his own person, but also the world he inhabits. Hence sonship in the present order of things has lament at its heart. And this lament isn’t sadness, regret or complaint as such, but *eschatological angst*: It is the dissatisfaction and anguished longing that result from awareness of the destiny God has ordained for His creation and the fact that the creation – including the children themselves – has yet attained to that destiny. Hence lament both authenticates the children’s present faith and hope and gives expression to it. Put differently, there is no genuine faith and hope where there is no lamentation. This is one reason why lamentation is central to Christian worship.

This is the context for understanding *imprecation*. Imprecation is often simplistically defined as verbally cursing another person; in terms of the Scripture, then, imprecation would involve calling on God to carry out such a curse or fulfill the desire for a bad outcome. Imprecation is so prevalent in the Psalter that the phrase, *imprecatory psalms*, is commonly used for the psalms of this sort. But scriptural imprecation – and the imprecatory psalms in particular – must be understood in terms of lament. Imprecation isn’t calling down God’s wrath on one’s enemies out of personal concern; it is an aspect of the eschatological angst that gives voice to faith and hope. *Thus imprecation is fundamental to biblical lament, and so to the children’s authentic worship of their God and Father.* Failure to understand this is the reason that so many Christians struggle with the imprecatory psalms and whether they apply to them, and if so, in what way.

Just as lament is a core theme in the Psalter, so is imprecation. Again, there are numerous psalms that are commonly classified as imprecatory, but imprecation is either implied or overt in virtually all of the lament psalms. Lament can exist without imprecation (such as when a person is lamenting his own failures), but scriptural imprecation always involves lament, since the imprecator is calling on God to address situations and persons that are afflicting and vexing him because they oppose what is right and good. And, as with psalms of lament, there are both personal and communal imprecatory psalms. Psalm 10 is a good example of a personal one, but one in which the psalmist spoke on behalf of all those among Yahweh’s people who love Him and are jealous for Him and His honor and the vindication of His truth and power.

1. Imprecation and lament arise from affliction and suffering, and so both involve petitioning the God who is able to give relief. So Psalm 10 opens with the psalmist pleading with God to take note and arise on behalf of those who are suffering at the hands of wicked men: “*Why do You stand afar off, O Yahweh? Why do you remain hidden in times of trouble?*” (v. 1). This is one of only two anonymous psalms in the first book of the Psalter, and its anonymity and lack of specificity make it difficult to discern the circumstance the psalmist was referring to. The Septuagint joins it with Psalm 9 as one poem, and the two do share an aligned acrostic structure. These two psalms are also aligned chiasmically: Psalm 9 ends on an imprecatory note (vv. 19-20), but as a song of praise and thanksgiving; Psalm 10 is prayer of imprecation that ends with a doxology of praise. If this conjoining is correct, Psalm 10 is associated with David. But even if David did pen this psalm, it’s still uncertain what he meant by “times of distress.” The only clarification the psalm provides is that this was a circumstance of oppression and affliction resulting from the willful and malevolent schemes of wicked men (v. 2a).

2. The psalmist didn't directly identify this distress, but he was clear in what he sought from Yahweh: He called on Him to turn these wicked schemes and actions back onto the heads of the evil men who were perpetrating them. He wanted them to suffer the very things they were subjecting their victims to (v. 2b). He then went on describe these evil-doers so as to show that this retribution was just and justly deserved (vv. 3-11). His description is multi-faceted, but he saw their *arrogance* as their fundamental offense.
- a. They were men who were consumed with *themselves* – their sense of greatness, power, and personal agenda, and this self-glory left them exalting themselves above the living God, to the point of regarding Him as irrelevant, if He exists at all. They were arrogantly unafraid to exploit and crush Yahweh's people, because, if He does exist, He was silent and uncaring, if not impotent. But as for their gods, these men believed that they were mighty and triumphant and had granted them supremacy over their adversaries, leaving them untouchable (vv. 3-6).
 - b. With such assured confidence, these evil-doers felt no restraint whatsoever. They gave themselves with abandon to their self-interests, consecrating their minds, mouths and limbs to their own agendas. Achieving their desired ends was all that mattered, and other people were simply instruments to be used in that purpose. Hence they were eager, unashamed, and even proud to exploit and oppress those under their power, which apparently included at least some among the children of Israel. Whether or not these men felt justified in their violence and oppression, they were confident that no one would challenge them – not even Israel's God, to whom the afflicted and oppressed were crying out. If He did exist, He was distant and unconcerned; He'd forgotten them and took no notice of their plight (v. 11; cf. also Psalm 14, 94:1-7, and Isaiah 10:5-15; note also Ezekiel 8-9, which addresses the same phenomenon among the Israelite people).
3. After rehearsing with Yahweh the shocking arrogance and shameless aggression of these oppressors, the psalmist again called on Him to arise and exact retribution against them (v. 12). Whereas they believed Israel's God was unaware and unconcerned about His people, and so would never call this wickedness and oppression to account (v. 13), the writer knew that Yahweh *does* see, and he urged Him to respond accordingly – to “*take all of this mischief and vexation into His hand.*” And he was convinced that the Lord would take action on their behalf, for He had come to the aid of His people many times in the past when they humbled themselves and cried out to Him (v. 14).
- Hadn't He delivered them from their bondage in Egypt?
 - And hadn't He come to their rescue over and over again during the era of the Judges, even though their repentance was fleeting and they quickly returned to the same pattern of unfaithfulness that had incurred their affliction and subjugation?

Though Israel had shown itself to be an incorrigibly unfaithful son, Yahweh remained steadfast as a faithful father and husband because He cannot deny Himself; whatever men might do and whatever their waywardness and infidelity, He remains committed to His purposes and their accomplishment (ref. Ezekiel 19:1-44, 24:1-27, 34:1-31, 36:1-38).

4. The psalmist's desire wasn't simply that God would rise up against those afflicting him and his companions, but that He would "break the arms of the wicked and evil-doer" so as to uncover and purge all evil from them. His concern and longing for justice transcended the immediate and circumstantial; *he longed for Yahweh's complete triumph such that there was no more wickedness to be found in the earth* (v. 15).

Thus he brought his song to its climax with an exultant declaration of his faith and confident hope in Yahweh, the God of Israel who is *King* – not just king over His people Israel, but over all the earth and all men.

- a. The psalmist proclaimed Him as the everlasting ruler of all creation, the sovereign Lord who raises up nations and brings them down, even as He had made the man Abraham into a great nation and driven out many other nations before them to give them the land He covenanted to them and their patriarchal fathers (vv. 16-17a; cf. Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-21; Exodus 15:1-18; also Psalm 47).
- b. Yahweh acted against human wickedness and rebellion when He drove out the Canaanite nations and gave His people their land as He promised, and the psalmist had no doubt that He would continue to be faithful to Himself, His character, His purposes and His people.

Yahweh had shown Himself perfectly faithful from the moment He ratified His covenant with Abraham. He had carried His covenant children through the centuries and always heard their broken, needy cries, whether they came to Him from His sanctuary on Mount Zion or from a distant land (Genesis 32; Exodus 2:23-3:10; Psalm 34:1-6). He had demonstrated repeatedly that His heart is ever inclined toward His people, and He rejoiced when they sought Him as humble, dependent, and grateful children. Thus the psalmist was fully confident that Yahweh heard his pleas on behalf of the oppressed and afflicted. Indeed, he believed that the Lord heard their *inner longing and groaning*, not just their outward cries (v. 17). Such a God would surely arise and come to their aid.

But again, the writer's burden and plea looked beyond his own circumstance and the injustice and oppression he and his fellows were enduring. He pled with Yahweh to arise against wicked men and their evil plots, *but in view of the Lord's own pledge to purge the world of its corruption, banish the curse and death, and impart new life to mankind*. The Lord had sworn by Himself and He would keep His word.

Thus the psalmist knew that, however it might appear in the moment (v. 1), Yahweh was neither distant nor indifferent to the affliction and cries of His people. Indeed, He "*heard the longing of the afflicted*" – their inward desires and groaning, and not simply their voiced prayers, and would surely come to their aid – not by delivering them from all injustice and opposition, but by "*strengthening their heart*" to be able to *endure* the things they were suffering. He was going to arise on behalf of the powerless (here, the "orphan" and the "oppressed") and vindicate them in the sight of their enemies. But this mighty deliverance awaited the day of judgment Yahweh ordained at the beginning; the day when man will no longer cause terror in the earth – not because the King rises up to destroy him, but because He triumphs to finally make him man *indeed* (vv. 17-18).