

2. A Psalm of Protest: When God Seems Absent

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Date: 19 May 2013

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[0 : 00] We're going to turn now, though, to our Bible reading this morning, and we return to the book of Psalms this morning, and to Psalm number 10. You'll find that if you have one of our church visitors' Bibles on page 451.

If not, then it's sandwiched between Job and Proverbs. You'll find the book of Psalms and Psalm 10 near the beginning. Last Sunday morning, we were looking at Psalm 145, a great psalm of praise. And you'll see, or you'll hear, as we read this psalm together, this is a very different psalm indeed, a psalm instead of protest. And it begins with a question.

Why, O Lord? Why, O Lord, do you stand afar off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? In arrogance, the wicked hotly pursue the poor.

Let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised. For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the Lord.

[1 : 15] In the pride of his face, the wicked 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 all his foes, he puffs at them. He says in his heart, I shall not be moved. Throughout all generations, I shall not meet adversity.

His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit and oppression. Under his tongue, a mischief and iniquity. He sits in ambush in the villages.

In hiding places, he murders the innocent. His eyes stealthily watch for the helpless. He likes an ambush like a lion in his thicket. He lurks that he may seize the poor.

He seizes the poor when he draws him into his net. The helpless are crushed, sink down and fall by his might. He says in his heart, God has forgotten.

[2 : 18] He has hidden his face. He will never see it. Arise, O Lord. O God, lift up your hand. Forget not the afflicted.

Why does the wicked renounce God and say in his heart, you will not call to account? But you do see. For you note mischief and vexation that you may take it into your hands.

To you, the helpless commits himself. You have been the helper of the fatherless. Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer. Call his wickedness to account till you find none.

The Lord is king forever and ever. The nations perish from his land. O Lord, you heal the fire of the afflicted. You will strengthen their heart.

You will incline your ear to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed. So that man who is of the earth may strike terror no more.

[3 : 25] Amen. May God bless to us. This is his word. Well, if you would turn with me to Psalm number 10 that we read together.

As I said, a psalm of protest when God seems to be absent. This past week, once again, our nation has been shocked and rocked by the reporting of the conviction of the gang of young Asian men in Oxford for the most appalling acts of depravity on children.

The judge said that these seven men put them through a living hell. And if you read the reports in the papers, you'll understand why he said that.

But perhaps the worst aspect of the whole business was the fact that even though the police had been involved on many occasions over several years and had even questioned several of these men after complaints had been made, nothing had been done to put a stop to these terrible crimes. Not for years and years. So it's no surprise that there have been many howls of protest. You may have heard, as I did on the Today program during the week, the chief constable of Thames Valley Police being interviewed, grilled by John Humphreys.

[5 : 07] And he put it to her that if her force had had the knowledge of these things and the power to intervene, why on earth had this wickedness gone on for so long and gone unchecked?

Surely the knowledge of evil and the power to intervene, faced with a failure to intervene and allowing that evil to go unchecked, surely that made the police and indeed the chief of police culpable.

Should you not resign? Is what he said to her. And quite understandably, there have been many calls of a similar nature. Just as there have been many similar questions asked, again with very good reason, about those who were in positions of power and authority in the BBC in the 1970s and 1980s, when it seems that almost a required part of the BBC culture was that the star presenters would be taking a carefree way, abusing women and even young girls.

And it seems that those in high places in the BBC knew what was going on, knew what men like Jimmy Savile and Stuart Hall were doing. Goodness knows how many others were up to it also. But it seems they did not use their power and their authority to stop these things happening, not even to censure the perpetrators. So is it any wonder that people should protest and do so very strongly?

[6 : 45] And likewise, there are many protests today in the public square about the government regulators in the financial services industry and the chiefs of these world's mega banks, on whose watch and through whose negligence vast fortunes have been lost.

They waltz off into the sunset, it seems, with bonuses and pensions that we could only dream of, while ordinary people suffer the battering and the fallout of the economic collapse that their actions has caused all around the world.

Our world, understandably, is full of loud and bitter protest of these things. And it's not hard to see why. When there is power and authority, and where that has been perceived to have failed, where there's been dereliction in duty, it is quite natural for people to protest.

Well, what about when the one in ultimate authority, who has ultimate power, seems to be in dereliction of duty?

Shouldn't we protest? Shouldn't we call for his resignation? When we look around at the world and we see it full of evil and full of wickedness, with so much injustice and apparent failure to hold perpetrators to account, shouldn't we call for God's resignation?

[8 : 18] Shouldn't we show God the door, as poor Roberto Mancini was shown the door at Manchester City on Monday morning? Isn't it time to give up on God?

Isn't it time to look elsewhere, to put our trust in another, in another religion, in another philosophy, in another spirituality, in something or someone that will deliver better results for our lives here on planet Earth?

Of course, that is what many people do. Many people have done that in protest. And what they perceive, God has done, or rather, God has not done.

Usually in their own personal lives. Often it is when something touches life, close to home. But that happens, isn't it?

Things that, unsettle us, when they're at arm's length, out in the world, when they're happening to others, these same things, devastate us utterly, when they come close, when they invade our own lives.

[9 : 19] When it's we, who are touched by the tragedy, when it's we, who are touched with the loss, or the bereavement, or whatever it is. So often that's when people say, oh, that's it. I've had it with God.

It's time for you to resign. In fact, I'm sacking you, God. Get out. I'm having nothing more to do with you. Well, the song that we have before us this morning from the psalmist, isn't quite saying that. But it is a real song of protest. A protest that the apparent silence, and the absence of God, and the failure, it seems, of God to use his power, and to use his authority, to do what he ought to do. Why? Why? That's a great question, isn't it, at the beginning of this psalm? Explain yourself to us, Lord. Because surely, you have some explaining to do.

I think, Bobby, we probably need to shut that door, don't we? Now, that is a question, isn't it, that I'm sure all of us have asked God at one time or another.

[10 : 30] And what this psalm teaches us is that protest like that to God is not always wrong. Indeed, it teaches us, I believe, that it is an integral part of a life of real faith.

Because faith, you see, in the biblical sense, isn't ever, ever, just hiding away from the real truth. Real faith is all about facing up to reality in this world.

Because it wants an explanation of truth and reality. And so the psalmist doesn't show God the door, as it were, but he interrogates God.

He wants answers. And he won't let him go until he gets them. So let's look together at this psalm of protest, then, about God's apparent absence.

Absence in the face of evil that is rampant in the world. And let's see the results of the psalmist's, John Humphrey's, interrogation of the Lord.

[11 : 34] It falls, I think, into three parts, if we look at it. First of all, there's a real protest. Then he outlines the real problem, and that leads him into real prayer.

The psalm begins very abruptly and somewhat shockingly in verses 1 and 2 with real protest. Real protest at the apparent absence of God.

Why, O Lord, do you stand afar off? Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble? Why are you hiding God? And surely, you should be acting.

You should be intervening against evil and for good. Verse 2, In arrogance, the wicked hotly pursue the poor. Let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised.

What are you waiting for, Lord? It's an agonized cry of protest. And it stems from a sense of perplexity about God seeming to be acting in such an un-God-like way.

[12 : 37] Where is the God who is sovereign and is good and who works justice? Where are you? You probably see in the footnotes to our Bible that Psalms 9 and 10 go together very much as companion pieces.

In fact, the Greek Old Testament has them together as just one psalm. And that's probably why there's no title at the beginning of Psalm 10 as there is in all the other ones around it. The title of Psalm 9 really covers both of these psalms.

And if you read through Psalm 9, then it makes this protesting question at the beginning here of Psalm 10 seem even more understandable. Look at Psalm 9, verse 4.

It reminds us that God is a God of just judgment. And he does administer righteous judgment from his throne. Verse 6, verse 6 speaks of his enemies being rebuked and rooted out.

Verse 8, it's utterly clear. He judges the world with righteousness. And on and on it goes. Verse 17, the wicked shall return to share all the nations that forget God.

[13 : 47] But that isn't what the psalmist seems to be seeing. not now, not even most of the time it seems. But when there's a clear disjunction between our credo, what we believe about God, and the observable facts in our lives and experience, it's very understandable that we have doubts, isn't it?

If we believe that God is just and good and that he is ultimately powerful, that he is on the throne of the whole universe, then when we see with our own eyes many things that suggest that he's not intervening when he could intervene, or that he's not intervening when he should intervene, then we're bound to ask why.

Why not? And why not now, Lord? Why do you stand afar off? That protest is very real.

And that's often so in our own prayers, I think. Sometimes our protest is expressing doubts of an intellectual kind. Perhaps we're wrestling with issues of science or something like that.

But most often I think the truth is that our doubts, the doubts that make us protest to God the most, are about issues of suffering and issues of unjust suffering.

[15 : 15] And above all, it's when these things, as I've said, come up close and personal when they affect us in our own personal lives. That's the truth. We probably don't like to admit it.

We may be bothered in a rather abstract and intellectual sort of way by innocent suffering in the world, but we become bothered, don't we, in a much more personal and visceral way when we see ourselves as the innocent victim or somebody very close to us.

That's when we really start to protest. But is it wrong to protest, like verses 1 and 2 of this psalm? Well, no, I don't think so. Because for a start, here it is in a psalm in our Bibles, a psalm that's preserved to be sung by the Lord's people.

We're even given choral instructions, probably about the tune in the superscription to Psalm 9. So it's an unashamed song of protest. It's not hidden away as if it was somehow unworthy.

[16 : 20] It's right here in the hymnbook of Israel. And indeed, as we look through the psalms, many, many of the sung prayers of God's people are full of questions, and full of doubts, and full of

perplexities, and protest to God.

Weren't even the very last words of prayer that we know from the lips of the Lord Jesus, something of a protest asking this very question, why have you forsaken me?

Why do you hide yourself, Lord? You see, doubts and protests like this are not a manifestation of unbelief, of abandoning faith.

They're the very opposite, they spring from faith. The protest here is not rejecting God, the psalmist is remonstrating with God.

He's calling him by name, why, oh Lord, he says, oh Yahweh, the personal name of the God he knows. That's the whole point, that's the sharpness of the problem for the psalmist, because he knows this Lord, he knows what he's like, he knows his goodness, he knows his grace, he knows his righteousness, his justice, and that's what makes the situation so very painful, because his God seems not to be being true to his own character, and that's why the psalmist is protesting so seriously, just as you would do, or I would do, if we had a close friend that we know and we love, and they seem to be acting so totally out of character, seem to be doing wrong, or being negligent, acting in a way that's utterly beneath themselves, you're not dispassionate about that, are you, with a friend or one of your children, you remonstrate with them, you confront them, you protest, that's not you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, and of course, the more close that relationship, the more passionate the protest is going to be, it just isn't you, what's going on, why are you being like this, don't be like this, and that's the issue for the psalmist, and indeed for us, so very often, as Ralph

[18 : 43] Davis puts it, this is not merely some intellectual quandary, but a devotional dilemma, the psalmist doesn't understand what the Lord is doing. Or in fact, what he is not doing. What he feels he ought to be doing, but isn't.

And yet he is still dealing with the Lord. He hasn't sacked the Lord. He's struggling with the Lord. He hasn't rejected God. He's wrestling with God. And that, friends, is a sign of real faith.

So if you find yourself in that place at the moment, perhaps in your prayers, perhaps you find that your prayers to the Lord just now are much more full of protest than of praise, don't despair. Don't doubt the reality of your own faith because you find yourself full of doubts and full of questionings about God. These struggles, even these real protests are the hallmark of real faith and realistic prayer. And you're in good company when you find yourself with these sort of questions on your lips, when you're crying out, why Lord?

It is a real question. And it's everywhere in Scripture, the mystery of the apparent absence of God in the face of evil and especially in the face of unjust suffering. And the answer comes not ever in trying to hide from that reality, trying to close our eyes to all the difficulties that confront our faith, to pretend away all of these challenges. No. The answer lies in facing these facts squarely and honestly, not in trying to close our minds protectively as if hiding from reality somehow would preserve our faith. There's no integrity in that. And in fact, there's no protection in it either. If our faith can't stand up to hard scrutiny of the reality of life, then surely it will wither and die in the end because it won't be real. It will be false.

Now far better a faith that confronts reality and doesn't try and bury reality under a lot of pious platitudes. Far better a real protest at the apparent absence of God than an unreal pretense that just tries to hide it. Because you see as verses 2 to 11 lay out so plainly for us here in the psalm because there is a real problem. There's a real problem to be faced up to in life and that is the real problem of the manifest arrogance of the godless. I've already acknowledged the general problem of evil in the apparent absence of God. But here you see in the psalm when we read it, it's not so much the problem of what we might call acts of God. It's not the tsunamis, the earthquakes, the tragedies naturally that kill people that's in view here. It's very much the acts of man.

[22 : 05] It's the acute moral problem of human wickedness that is exercising the psalmist. It's the arrogance of the wicked, verse 2. It's his boasting, verse 3. It's his exploitation of the poor.

By the way, in the Bible, the poor doesn't just mean the economically poor, but it means all of those who lack power, who lack control, who are often hapless and helpless under the influence of others. And that word helpless occurs again and again in the psalm in verse 8 and again in verse 10 and in verse 14. It's these hapless, helpless, wretched souls who are crushed, who sink down, says verse 10, under the hand of the wicked.

And that is a huge moral problem. And it's a problem to every decent human being. We must remember, mustn't we, that morality is not just the prerogative of Christian people.

Sometimes Christians talk as if that were so, as though the rest of the world were simply utterly immoral or amoral. Friends, that is foolish talk. And people get rightly annoyed with Christians when they say that sort of thing.

[23 : 23] They're right to protest that it's not only the religious who have a developed sense of morality. That's patent nonsense. Of course, we as Christians would want to point out respectfully that we believe the origin of that morality does come from God.

Part of an innate reality of being human. It's because we are creatures made in the image of God. And although that image is fallen, that image remains. However unconscious a person might be of that fact.

By their very nature, they have a sense of what is right and wrong. What is just and unjust. However imperfect their conscience might be. It's a vestige of the rightness of God that is imprinted upon the human mind.

We know what is fair and unfair. That's why some of the very first words that your children ever speak. What are they? That's not fair. Isn't that right?

And we keep on saying words like that all of our life. Where is justice in this world of ours? Of course, the answer of some today, like Professor Dawkins, for example, is that there is none.

[24 : 46] That it's just might that is right. It's just the power of our selfish genes that are in charge. And you know, it sounds so plausible, so scientific, so impressive when you read his books.

And he is a very fine writer. But my difficulty, you see, is that when you translate these things into real life, they just do not give satisfactory answers to the moral problems of our universe, which are real problems.

And can't just be explained away by evolutionary biology or something like that. See, if the selfish gene really is the driving force of this universe, if we are just, as he says, dancing to the music of our DNA, if there is no evil and no good, if there's just blind, pitiless indifference in the universe, as Dr. Dawkins maintains, then should we feel no horror at the Oxford gang?

Shouldn't we even applaud them for their self-serving achievement for all these years? That just isn't how real people think, is it?

Unless they're sick, unless they're disturbed, unless they're people that are put in prison or in hospital. Decent people rightly have a sense of moral outrage.

[26 : 10] And if justice seems not to be done, then it is a huge problem. Well, if that is so for every decent person in this world, then how much bigger a problem is it for the Christian believer who worships the Lord, the God of Psalm 9, verse 8, the God who is a righteous judge?

How much bigger a problem is it for us who see such moral outrage so close at hand and nothing being done about it? And the psalm does have the feel, doesn't it, of first-hand experience.

There's nothing to sensitize to the outrage of theft or of violent assault or of murder or of rape. Nothing sensitizes us to these things nearly so much as when it comes close to home and affects us.

When it's your son who's beaten to pulp, when it's your house that's burgled, when it's your daughter that's raped or murdered, when it's your job that's lost because of somebody else's wrongdoing.

And you see, verses 3 to 11 describe such wickedness as though it was very much up close and personal. And yet, it is the world that all of us recognize so easily.

[27 : 31] The psalmist lays out the character and the conduct and the credo of the godless wicked, what he believes that drives him to be what he is and what he does.

Verses 3 to 6 show us his character. A character full of an arrogant sense of invincibility. He's arrogant, verse 2. He boasts, verse 3.

He curses God. He puffs at his foes. And he says, verse 5, I shall not be moved. I'm invincible.

His ways prosper at all times. I speak to a young man just this week who once was a soldier in Afghanistan. He said when he came home from Afghanistan, his mother had lost weight.

She looked gaunt. She hadn't been sleeping. She'd been worried sick the whole time that he was there. He said the strange thing was, I felt utterly invincible. Nothing was ever going to happen to me.

[28 : 30] The reckless invincibility of the young soldier. And that's the picture here. The invincibility of the wicked. Verses 7 to 10 shows his conduct.

Conduct of active iniquity. His mouth and his tongue deceive and oppress. Destroying others. Verse 7, serving himself. Verse 8 tells us his eyes are on the main chance to ambush the helpless.

And verse 9 tells us his hand is quick to ensnare, to profit from the misfortune of others. Think of the loan shark roaming the housing estate. Think of the drug pusher and his controller.

At the other end of the scale, think of the Bernie Madoffs and the others like him who defrauded thousands of the extremely wealthy of their money. Think of everything in between.

This is our world. It's the world as we know it. And it's all because, verse 11, do you see? He says in his heart, God has forgotten.

[29 : 34] He's hidden his face. He'll never see it. There'll be no reckoning. God is either dead or he doesn't exist. Or if he does exist, he's impotent.

He'll never judge. He'll certainly never judge me. He'll never judge me. It's that credo of practical atheism that drives the evil that issues from the heart of man, isn't it?

Whether you really deny God's existence intellectually or whether just in practice that's the way you are. Most people think like that.

Oh, it'll be okay in the end with the big man upstairs. How many times have you heard that sort of thing expressed? Because, you see, we've changed God.

Changed him into a creature of our own making to serve us the way we want him to be. And, of course, we very much prefer, don't we, a God who's blind, a God who suffers from amnesia, and a God who will never, ever judge anybody, least of all me.

[30 : 37] Alas, that attitude is almost as common today inside the professing church as outside it. But we should note that that isn't new either because the psalmist here is describing what he sees inside the land of Israel, inside the community of faith among those who at least outwardly profess to be the people of the Lord.

And yet, arrogantly assured of their own invincibility, and of God's impotence to do anything in the face of their sin. I think perhaps one of the most striking incidences I've ever witnessed in my life of that attitude was on the floor of the Presbytery of Glasgow when an ordained minister stood up before all of us, regaled us, smiling with his way of life and his lifestyle, utterly at odds to the word of God.

and then stood and sneered and said mockingly, and not one church roof in this Presbytery has yet fallen on my head and brought God's justice down upon me.

Ha, ha, ha. Such arrogance. There is no God to judge. He's hidden his face. He will never see it. I shall never be moved. That's the confident boast of the ungodly. And so it seems to be, verse 5, his ways prosper at all times.

[32 : 16] That is a real problem. And the psalmist doesn't hide it. Indeed, it's quite the opposite. As Derek Kidner, I think, rightly says, he touches the nerve of this problem and keeps its pain alive against the comfort of our familiarity or indeed complicity with a corrupt world.

The Bible honestly confronts reality and the problem of evil. Far from allowing us to anesthetize ourselves to the truth, it drives us to confront this truth and indeed to confront greater truths that alone will keep us from despair and disillusion about this world.

He reminds us that there is evil in the heart of man and that that is not just a problem but in fact it is the problem of this world. And that is what the whole biblical gospel is about, friends.

It's about bringing an ultimate answer to all such evil through the coming of God's everlasting kingdom. And it's that, grappling with that reality, that drives the psalmist to the prayer of verses 12 to 18 which is a real prayer.

Real prayer rooted in the assurance of the gospel. See, the protest of real faith gives way to the prayer of real faith for the coming of the kingdom of God according to promise.

[33 : 55] As God shows himself to be not absent but active. Active amid much apparent darkness and true to who he really is, the righteous one who will set all things right according to his promise and according to his plan.

I think there's a real change in tone at verse 12. The psalmist prays now with a real sense of hope. Arise, O Lord, O God, lift up your hand. See, there's a confidence in God there and there's a clear sense that the self-confident assurance of the wicked is in fact greatly misplaced despite all of his boasts.

The psalmist protests now, you see, is leveled squarely at the wicked man in verse 13. Why does the wicked renounce God? Why does he say in his heart you won't call him to account? Not so at

all, says the psalmist.

It's not that he's disregarding the reality of the wicked. He's been absolutely honest about it but now, as Derek Kibnett says, he is speaking in faith about faith.

[35 : 08] That is, he's saying that is not the only truth to be considered here. There is more. And no longer is he just viewing things from below as it were with a narrow focus lens of earthly sight.

He's pulling out so that the visual field is wider and he sees more truth. He's looking to what he knows to be true both in his own experience and through God's revelation in scripture.

that God is not absent even when he may seem to be but rather he is active but that he's working according to his own perfect timetable and his own perfect plan.

But he will show himself to be the God who is just and good and powerful and true. Verse 14, do you see? He does see. And verse 16, God is king forever and ever.

He is sovereign. And verse 18, he will survive. He'll do justice to the oppressed and likewise he will destroy those who terrorize them now.

[36 : 22] And it's because he knows all these things are also true that he can pray as confidently as he does in verse 15 to break the arm, that is to break the power of evil and to a call to account all that is wrong at the bar of divine justice.

You see, what a difference that perspective on the whole reality of the situation, what a difference it makes. It's knowing that reality that the believer who often is helpless as verse 14 says, that he can commit himself to the Lord, literally abandon himself to the Lord.

In the face of much perplexity and doubt. The reality of a troubled world hasn't changed, it's still there, he hasn't pretended it away, of course.

But knowing something crucial about the bigger picture of that reality has changed everything about how he faces up to the world.

What a difference understanding that greater reality makes, friends, especially in a war against evil. It was in some of the darkest days of the last war, in 1940, when Britain was facing massive aerial assault from the Luftwaffe, that observers on the ground were often found asking, where on earth are the RAF?

[37 : 53] Nazi bombers and fighters were coming across the channel, apparently unopposed in vast numbers. The view from the cockpit of those bombers was similarly triumphant.

It seemed to be that they had unopposed superiority, unopposed strength. It seemed to be that there were no British fighters to come up and challenge them. Many of the coastal towns were badly bombed and suffered because of that apparent lack of any counterattack.

But you see, what those on the ground and what those in the invading cockpits did not know was that the RAF was not absent, but that the secret advances that the British had made in radar technology meant that the invaders, every move was being watched and charted in all the chain home stations linked around the coast.

Every move of the enemy was seen. And so only when the enemy fighters and bombers came inland right over the home RAF bases where home fighters could come back down and refuel where British fighters who were shot down could parachute to safety and go back up in other planes.

Only when they came onto that territory did the command go out and the planes go up. And wave after wave of surprise attack come upon the enemy.

[39 : 22] enemy and what seemed like an indestructible force that would destroy this nation and pave the way to all-out invasion was in the end repulsed and destroyed.

How different a view of the same reality if you knew not only the view from the ground but the view of those radar screens in the chain home stations. Well, verse 14, God in heaven does see all the evil and the wickedness in this world and in men's hearts and he will take it in hand.

Some years ago when I was living and working in London, I had to attend what was euphemistically known as a speed workshop. I'd been traveling up to a conference in Northamptonshire and taking Ralph Davis, as it happened, to that conference.

We were deep in conversation about the interpretation of prophecy and I went through one of these little villages and got caught by one of these nasty speed cameras behind a bush. I was doing 37 miles an hour in a 30 zone and so the letter came through and it offered me the choice of three points on my license and a 60 pound fine or to pay 60 pounds for the privilege of going to a speed workshop and to avoid having the three points on my license.

I chose that option. It turned out to be a day of total disaster. I had to drive all the way to Northampton. When I got there I found I'd forgotten my wallet, I couldn't buy any lunch and I nearly ran out of petrol on the way home.

[41 : 05] I had to phone a friend in North London and go in and borrow 10 pounds to get petrol. But anyway, it was a very useful experience. They told us all sorts of things about where you would find speed cameras and what triggered them and all sorts of things.

I'm not sure if they were really intending to help us to get around the speed traps or to encourage us not to speed. But at any rate, one thing from that day I will never forget. They showed us photographs of various speeding incidents and one in particular was of a motorbike rider going through one of these little villages every morning to his work.

And he went through the speed camera every single day at 110 miles an hour in the 30 miles an hour zone. But you see, since a motorbike has no number plate on the front and since the speed camera was looking at the speeding motorbike from the front, he was never caught.

They showed us picture after picture every day with a motorbike rider going past, shaking his fist at the camera, putting his V's up at the camera and making other obscene gestures at the camera. But then they showed us a series of three very interesting photographs. One was the rider going through at 110 miles an hour and making an obscene gesture at the camera.

[42 : 29] The next picture told a very different story. What he didn't know was that the county council also had mobile speed cameras. And right around the corner from that fixed camera was a mobile camera which took his photo from behind.

The next photo, 110 miles an hour with his number plate plainly in view. And the third photo was the report from the newspaper of his imprisonment and enormous fine.

But you do see, says the psalmist. And friends, those who think God is blind and doesn't see and won't ever call to account, are in for an almighty shock far, far greater than the shock that biker got. Because God does see. He notes all wickedness and arrogant pride in the human heart. And what a shock it will be to the nations that he is sovereign.

He is the king forever and ever. And that he will save those who abandon themselves to him, bringing justice to the fatherless and the oppressed. And the rude reality that those who think they are invincible are not, in fact, immortal.

[43 : 51] But as verse 18 says, they're just creatures of the earth who return to dust to strike terror no more. And to face on that day the terror of him who, as verse 15 says, calls his wickedness to account until you find none.

That is, pursues just retribution to the very last trace. See, friends, the psalmist prayer is rooted in the assurance of the gospel that the whole Bible teaches that God is not absent, as though he may appear to be, but that he's active, that he has arisen and taken the whole problem of evil in his hand.

The whole story of the Bible is how he is bringing verse 18 to its final consummation in a relentless, inexorable way as he is constantly at work doing that, however absent it may sometimes seem that he is to his children.

But that's his pattern. Think of Joseph, who we've been studying recently, and how God wasn't absent but was active amid all the evil that was surrounding his life to work a great salvation.

Think of the Exodus when God's people Israel were crying out to him, believing God had abandoned them and gone, and yet already his deliverer Moses had been born and would lead them to rescue from the Egyptians.

[45 : 30] And never forget that greatest darkness of all, the darkness of Calvary, when surely the faithful lamented to God and protested to God, why doesn't he save Jesus from the cross?

Even the Son of God himself prayed a prayer of protest. Why have you forsaken me? Where are you, God? But in the darkness he was not absent.

He was active, arising, lifting up his hand to remember his afflicted ones, to bring righteousness to his own and to destroy forever the terror of his people.

So friends, don't panic when evil abounds, when it seems God is absent, when it seems he's uncaring or impotent. Whether it's maybe physical persecution against believers in your country, whether it's the corruption in the professing church today that makes us despair, whether it's the ferocity of temptation of the evil one in your own heart afflicting you within.

Don't panic. Don't try and pretend these things away. You can't. They're real. But rather let your protests to God lead you to real prayer to God.

[46 : 57] Prayer rooted in the assurance of his gospel, of the God who does see and who is sovereign and who will save according to his certain promise and plan.

And as we do that, as verse 17 says, he will strengthen our hearts. He will strengthen our hearts every day until that great day.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord, how we thank you that though veiled from our eyes, you have taught us that you are there and you are here and you are near.

And that one day every eye will see what we now see and know by faith. So God, and keep our faith, we pray, as honestly we wrestle with you in the prayers that fill our lives and in the devotion that we maintain because we know you and because we love you.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. Amen. Amen.