

When God Seems Absent

Psalm 10 – a song of protest

- ¹ Why, O LORD, do you stand far away?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
- ² In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor;
let them be caught in the schemes that they
have devised.
- ³ For the wicked boasts of the desires of his soul,
and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces
the LORD.
- ⁴ In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him;
all his thoughts are, “There is no God.”
- ⁵ His ways prosper at all times;
your judgments are on high, out of his sight;
as for all his foes, he puffs at them.
- ⁶ He says in his heart, “I shall not be moved;
throughout all generations I shall not meet adversity.”
- ⁷ His mouth is filled with cursing and deceit
and oppression;
under his tongue are mischief and iniquity.
- ⁸ He sits in ambush in the villages;
in hiding places he murders the innocent.
His eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;
- ⁹ he lurks in 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.
- ¹⁰ The helpless are crushed, sink down,
and fall by his might.
- ¹¹ He says in his heart, "God has forgotten,
he has hidden his face, he will never see it."
- ¹² Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand;
forget not the afflicted.
- ¹³ Why does the wicked renounce God
and say in his heart, "You will not call to account"?
- ¹⁴ 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.
- ¹⁵ Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer;
call his wickedness to account till you find none.
- ¹⁶ The LORD is king forever and ever;
the nations perish from his land.
- ¹⁷ O LORD, you hear the desire of the afflicted;
you will strengthen their heart; you will incline
your ear
- ¹⁸ to do justice to the fatherless and the oppressed,
so that man who is of the earth may strike terror
no more.

Psalm 10

In recent years Britain has been shocked by multiple trials and convictions of large 'grooming' gangs for the most appalling acts of depravity in sexually abusing and prostituting young children. In one such case the judge said that these men put the girls through 'a living hell' and reading just some of the press reports revealed why: the sheer, callous wickedness was indeed hellish. But perhaps the most scandalous aspect of many of these cases was that though the police had been involved on

many occasions over several years, questioning many of these men after multiple complaints were made, nothing had been done to put a stop to these terrible crimes. It was strongly suspected that because these gangs were almost exclusively young, Muslim men of Pakistani origin, the authorities were too fearful of the charge of 'racism' and 'islamophobia' to risk 'community upset' by doing more. So the wicked, shameful exploitation went on for years and years. It is no surprise that there were many howls of protest. The responsible Chief Constable in one case was grilled by John Humphrys on Radio 4's *Today* Programme, who put it to her that, given the Force's knowledge of the evil but their abject failure to intervene – which allowed that evil to go unchecked – the Police, and indeed the Chief of Police, were surely culpable. 'Should you not resign?' he said to her; understandably, there were many similar calls.

In the same way, many questions have been asked of those in positions of power and authority in the BBC during the 1970s and 1980s as it has emerged there was a widespread culture of star presenters sexually abusing women and even young girls in a carefree way. Those in high places in the BBC, we now know, knew what men like Jimmy Saville and Stuart Hall (and who knows how many others) were doing. But it seems they did not use their authority to stop, nor even to censure, the perpetrators. So is it any wonder that people should now protest, and do so very strongly, as the ghastly realities have become public?

Likewise there were many protests in the public square in the wake of the global financial crisis about government regulators of the financial services industry, and the chiefs of the big banks on whose watch, and through whose reckless negligence, huge losses resulted. While vast numbers of people suffered the fallout of the economic collapse their actions caused, huge burdens of debt and taxation were placed on populations, and ordinary people saw their savings capacity obliterated through near-zero interest rates (one of the most

effective wealth transfers from the prudent to the prodigal in history). Many of the elites waltzed off into the sunset with bonuses and pensions most people could only dream of.

Our world is full of loud and bitter *protest* at these, and many other, terrible injustices. When power and authority has failed, where there has been dereliction in duty, it is quite natural for people to protest.

Give up on God?

What about when the One in ultimate authority, who has supreme power, seems to be in dereliction of duty: should we not protest? Should we not call for *His* resignation? When we look around at our world and we see it full of wickedness and evil, with so much injustice and apparent failure to hold perpetrators to account, should we not call for *God's* resignation? Shouldn't we show *God* the door? Is it not time to give up on God and put our trust elsewhere: in another religion, another philosophy, another spirituality – in something or someone that will deliver better results for our lives here on planet earth?

Many people *have* done that in protest at what they perceive God has done – or more often *not* done – in their own personal lives. Usually it is when something touches life close to home that this happens; headlines that may unsettle us when they are at arm's length out in the world can utterly devastate us when they invade our own lives. So often it is when personally touched by loss, bereavement, or tragedy of some kind that people say, 'That is it; I've had it with God! It is time for you to resign, God; in fact I'm sacking you. Get out, I want nothing more to do with you in my life!'

The Psalmist here in Psalm 10 is not quite saying that, but it *is* a real song of *protest* – at the apparent silence and absence of God, and at His seeming failure to use His power and His authority to do what He ought to do. *Why?* That is the question at the beginning of this Psalm: 'Explain yourself to us, God, because surely you have some explaining to do.'

¹Why, O LORD, do you stand far away?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

This is a question I am sure most of us will have asked God at one time or another, and what this Psalm teaches us is that such protest to God is not always wrong; indeed, it tells us it is an integral part of the life of faith. Real, biblical faith does not, ever, hide away from the truth; it is all about facing up to reality in this world, because it seeks a divine explanation of that reality. So the Psalmist is not showing God the door, as it were; he is interrogating God. He wants answers, and he won't let Him go until he gets them. So, if we look closely at this Psalm of protest about God's apparent absence in the face of evil that is rampant in the world, we will learn from the Psalmist's faith-provoked, and ultimately faith-strengthening, interrogation of the LORD. His honest, but anguished, heart song to God falls into three parts: first, a real protest, a real problem, and a real prayer.

A Real Protest

The Psalm begins very abruptly, and somewhat shockingly, with words of real protest at the apparent *absence of God*: 'Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?' (1). Why are you hiding, God, when surely you should be acting – *intervening* against evil and for good? 'In arrogance the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the schemes that they have devised' (2).

What are you waiting for, LORD? It is an agonised cry of protest and it stems from a sense of a perplexity about God seeming to be acting in such an un-Godlike way. Where is the God who is sovereign and is good and who works justice? Most Bibles say in a footnote that Psalms 9-10 belong together as companion pieces and in the Greek Old Testament they appear