

PSALMS 9 and 10

- God is known in his acts of justice -

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Introduction and setting

In the Septuagint Psalm 9 and 10 together form one alphabetical (acrostic) psalm, i.e. each poetic unit begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet.

“Psalm 9 presents the first half of the alphabet (letters aleph to kaph), while Psalm 10 continues with the second half (letters lamed to taw). In addition, many of the themes and concepts from Psalm 9 are repeated in Psalm 10. The lack of a title at the head of Psalm 10 in a part of the book where titles are the norm is another indication of an original unity.”¹

These two psalms share many linguistic and thematic features, but also form a contrast in many respects. Psalm 9 mainly looks back upon the conflict between the speaker in the psalm and the “wicked nations”. In Psalm 10 these battles are a current reality and are between “the wicked” and “the helpless”. It will become clear that the speaker in Psalm 9 speaks on behalf of the helpless in Psalm 10. It seems as if the Lord’s just judgements in the past (Psalm 9) form the basis of the faith in Psalm 10 that the Lord will intervene in a very similar way in the present unrest in Israel.

¹ Longman, Tremper III. Psalms: Tyndale Old Testament Commentary. Inter Varsity Press:Nottingham, p. 62.

Form and structure

The form and structure is determined by the alphabetical order of the psalm(s). According to Broyles this lends the psalm the style of an anthology.²

Exposition

Verse 1-6:

For the director of music. To the tune of "The Death of the Son." A psalm of David.

- ¹ *I will give thanks to you, LORD, with all my heart;
I will tell of all your wonderful deeds.*
- ² *I will be glad and rejoice in you;
I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High.*
- ³ *My enemies turn back;
they stumble and perish before you.*
- ⁴ *For you have upheld my right and my cause,
sitting enthroned as the righteous judge.*
- ⁵ *You have rebuked the nations and destroyed the wicked;
you have blotted out their name for ever and ever.*
- ⁶ *Endless ruin has overtaken my enemies,
you have uprooted their cities;
even the memory of them has perished.*

- ❖ These verses consist of thanksgiving. The author expresses his joy in the Lord himself. This is true joy; joy in the Lord who reveals himself in his deeds and gifts of salvation. Here is no reference to a specific occasion of the Lord's deliverance; it is as if all of God's interventions are summarized in the act of the Lord sitting enthroned as righteous judge, upholding the right and cause of the weak. We should be careful here. Sometimes the Lord as saviour and warrior for the cause of the believers is contrasted with or separated from the Lord as judge. This is a very common error. We will see in these two psalms that the Lord's acts as

² Broyles, Craig C. *Psalms – New International Biblical Commentary*. Hendrickson Publishers: Massachusetts, p. 74.

warrior for the weak can never be separated from his role as royal judge on his throne, judging the enemies of the righteous.

- ❖ In Psalm 9, these enemies are primarily “the nations”. The life of righteous Israel is placed in an international context. It recalls Psalm 2, where the Lord’s anointed (i.e. his enthroned judge) king is rejected by the nations. The besieged in this case are the covenant people of the Lord as a nation; the people of Zion are under attack from “the nations” who are depicted as “the wicked”. The wicked are those who do not seek refuge with the anointed king of the Lord. Even in the time of the Old Testament, Jerusalem, the city of David, was open to people from all nations who sought refuge under the wings of the Lord’s protection. They either rejected the king of Israel (the Davidic anointed Messiah) or found safety for themselves in the worship and praise of him who sits upon his throne. The speaker in this psalm sets the example of what it means to acknowledge the Lord and act righteously; he thanks the Lord for his righteous judgement! He finds safety and comfort in a judge who will not judge in an unrighteous manner. The rule of Yahweh and the judgement of Yahweh over the nations are identified. The Lord will uphold what is right; that is his rule! That calls for thanksgiving, and this is what the psalmist does!

Verses 7-12:

- ⁷ The LORD reigns forever;
he has established his throne for judgment.*
- ⁸ He rules the world in righteousness
and judges the peoples with equity.*
- ⁹ The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.*
- ¹⁰ Those who know your name trust in you,
for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you.*
- ¹¹ Sing the praises of the LORD, enthroned in Zion;
proclaim among the nations what he has done.*
- ¹² For he who avenges blood remembers;
he does not ignore the cries of the afflicted.*



This section can be characterized as hymnic praise. It gives insight into the reasons why Yahweh’s judgement is desired and desirable. The reason is that in this way, the Lord

himself is a refuge for those who are oppressed. The oppressed are those who suffer under unjust deeds and actions of others, while they love what is right and seek what is right for all. The “international” context within which the suffering of the oppressed is placed in this psalm leads us to think in the first place of political and social injustices that were perpetrated.

- ❖ In verse 7 we see again the unity between the rule of the Lord and his judgement over injustice. The contrast between those who enjoy the Lord’s protection and those who are judged lies in the trust demonstrated by the oppressed. There are those who “trust in the Lord” and “who seek the Lord” (vs. 10); they are the righteous according to the psalms. They have no absolute righteousness of their own, but are judged by Yahweh to be righteous because they seek his protection. We can say that they flee to the one whose judgement they fear; that is the paradox of faith! And this is possible only because the judge on the throne is known to be full of mercy and slow to anger. These mercies are praised in this section; it is an abundance of goodness that is demonstrated by the Lord for those who seek refuge in and with him and his righteous judgement. Only the wicked need to fear the judgement of the Lord from his throne; for the weak, it is a safe haven. Words like “refuge” and “stronghold” (vs. 9) indicate the safety provided by the Lord’s judgement for the righteous.
- ❖ This is a message to be proclaimed to all the nations (vs. 11). The Lord is one who surely acts in response to the cries of the afflicted. This leads to the call for universal praise to the Lord. The Lord never turns a blind eye to unjust deeds; he does not “ignore” and he “remembers”, even though people act as if they do not see the injustices; even where people are blind to them because of their own weaknesses and lack of love for justice; even when people have very short memories and are prone to forget the wrongs done. What a comfort to know that the Lord takes these matters very seriously; he will not forget – that is the character of his rule in Zion.

Verses 13-20:

¹³ *LORD, see how my enemies persecute me!*

Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death,

¹⁴ *that I may declare your praises*

in the gates of Daughter Zion,

and there rejoice in your salvation.

*15 The nations have fallen into the pit they have dug;
their feet are caught in the net they have hidden.*

*16 The LORD is known by his acts of justice;
the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands.*

*17 The wicked go down to the realm of the dead,
all the nations that forget God.*

*18 But God will never forget the needy;
the hope of the afflicted will never perish.*

*19 Arise, LORD, do not let mortals triumph;
let the nations be judged in your presence.*

*20 Strike them with terror, LORD;
let the nations know they are only mortal.*

- ❖ The salvation of which the psalm sings is nothing less than salvation from the injustices of the psalmist's enemies. Too often we have a very narrow concept of salvation as if it only concerns the forgiveness of our own personal sins and injustices. Such an attitude displays a very limited and, in a sense, self-centred view. The glory of salvation in the Bible is that it is a message about God's victory over ALL forms of sin. Salvation is the reality of God doing what is right and that we may share in that righteousness. In the psalms we learn that God does what is right in and through his anointed Davidic king in Jerusalem (God's "son", cf. Psalm 2). In Christ this righteousness of God who does what is right, has come very near. The true righteousness of God is found in the Messiah/anointed God-man Jesus Christ. God does what is right and therefore also judges through Jesus. The Lamb is upon the throne and He will judge the nations (cf. Revelation of John); the Lamb rules through judgement over all that is unjust.
- ❖ In this section of Psalm 9 the persecution by the unrighteous is experienced as being brought to the gates of death (vs. 13). But it sings about being transported from those gates to "the gates of daughter Zion" (vs. 14). There in the temple in Jerusalem a song is sung about the enemies who get caught in their own net of wickedness. God judges by letting the fruit of their deeds come to fruition upon themselves. They are ensnared by the work of their own hands (vs. 16). Again we hear about the Lord's protection for the weak and his judgement of the wicked (vs. 18-20). The judgement of the Lord is clearly fair; he allows the wicked to become the victims of their own deeds. Yahweh's judgement is never unjust! This

is a sure hope fixed in the distinction between man's mortality and the Lord who can and will never perish.

Psalm 10

¹ *Why, LORD, do you stand far off?*

Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

² *In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak,
who are caught in the schemes he devises.*

³ *He boasts about the cravings of his heart;
he blesses the greedy and reviles the LORD.*

⁴ *In his pride the wicked man does not seek him;
in all his thoughts there is no room for God.*

⁵ *His ways are always prosperous;
your laws are rejected by him;
he sneers at all his enemies.*

⁶ *He says to himself, "Nothing will ever shake me."
He swears, "No one will ever do me harm."*

⁷ *His mouth is full of lies and threats;
trouble and evil are under his tongue.*

⁸ *He lies in wait near the villages;
from ambush he murders the innocent.*

His eyes watch in secret for his victims;

⁹ *like a lion in cover he lies in wait.*

*He lies in wait to catch the helpless;
he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net.*

¹⁰ *His victims are crushed, they collapse;
they fall under his strength.*

¹¹ *He says to himself, "God will never notice;
he covers his face and never sees."*

- ❖ The psalm turns to an immediate present predicament. The scene is also not international like Psalm 9 anymore, but more local and individual. God is experienced as if He has distanced himself from the predicament of the psalmist: "*Why Lord, do you stand far off?*" Apparently the Lord is absent. Present realities seem to contradict the joy in the Lord's just

rule. The picture that is painted in this section is one of the wicked that freely abuse the helpless. Again the wicked are those who are arrogant, live by their own plans and schemes, are not dependent on the Lord and live as if they have the whole world in their own hands. The wicked do not seek the Lord. There is no room for God in their thoughts (vs. 4). That does not mean that the wicked one is an atheist in the modern sense of the term. It simply means that he has no place for the Lord in his equation when he makes his plans; there is no awareness that the Lord can and will call him to account. He is the master of his own destiny and also of the destinies of many others. Added to that are the lies, evil plans and threats that he makes against those who are totally dependent upon God and therefore portrayed as the “helpless”. The crown upon his unjust plans is that he thinks God will not take notice of this injustice and is powerless against it (vs. 11); he is supported in his conviction by his daily experience as he prospers through the downfall of those he trample upon.

Verses 12-15:

12 Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God.

Do not forget the helpless.

13 Why does the wicked man revile God?

Why does he say to himself,

“He won’t call me to account”?

14 But you, God, see the trouble of the afflicted;

you consider their grief and take it in hand.

The victims commit themselves to you;

you are the helper of the fatherless.

15 Break the arm of the wicked man;

call the evildoer to account for his wickedness

that would not otherwise be found out.

- ❖ This section is a petition. The call to God to “arise” refers to the Lord who is ready to go out to battle against his enemies. This was the call given as the Ark of the Covenant was taken up by the Levites to lead the Lord’s people in battle (cf. Num. 10:35). It is a prayer/call to the Lord to intervene. The Lord is here depicted as a warrior to be present on the battlefield.

Verses 16-18:

- 16 The LORD is King for ever and ever;
the nations will perish from his land.*
- 17 You, LORD, hear the desire of the afflicted;
you encourage them, and you listen to their cry,*
- 18 defending the fatherless and the oppressed,
so that mere earthly mortals
will never again strike terror.*

- ❖ The psalm ends with the assurance that the Lord has heard the cry of the helpless. There is confidence that the Lord will act. The afflicted and oppressed are portrayed as fatherless, i.e. they have nobody to protect them. The ground of all this confidence in the help and relief from the Lord is the assurance that the Lord is king; He is on his throne; He will do battle in judgement.

Application

- ❖ We must note the very strong emphasis in these two psalms on the **rule of the Lord**. Many researchers see the rule of the Lord as the climax and centre of the whole Book of Psalms. We often hear “the Lord is King”, “the Lord reigns”, the Lord being addressed as “my king”. In the introduction to the Book of Psalms, i.e. Psalm 2, there is a very explicit connection laid between the anointed king of Israel in Jerusalem and the rule of the Lord God himself. This shared rule of the Lord and the king in Zion is constantly affirmed in the psalms. God’s rule is exercised through his anointed.
- ❖ In these two psalms the basic themes of the whole Psalter are all joined together:
 - The rule of the Lord
 - The representative rule of the king
 - The plea for help in time of trouble
 - The boasting of the wicked and the way of the righteous
 - The justice of God that functions on behalf of the weak and the poor.³

³ The ruler in Zion and the hope of the poor – Psalms 9-10 in the context of the Psalter in Miller, Patrick D. The way of the Lord – Essays in Old Testament theology. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Michigan, p. 168-169.

- ❖ The contrast between the righteous and the wicked and the conflict between them must receive due attention in the teaching from Psalms 9-10. The wicked are sometimes the nations that reject the righteous rule of the Lord's anointed king, but at other times (Psalm 10) the wicked are members of the covenant people of the Lord at whose hands the weak and poor are oppressed. One of the primary concerns of the ruler of Israel was the interests of the needy and those who are helpless in themselves.
 - ❖ The call to the Lord for help and the prayers of the righteous occupy a very important place in these two psalms. The content of this prayer is the call to the Lord to "rise up". This refers to the Lord taking up his rule over all through his righteous judgement. The longing for God's judgement over all forms of injustice forms a very important place in the life of the church. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6) are encouraged in these psalms to pray that the righteous kingdom of God will come. All resistance to the just rule of Christ as God's anointed should come to an end as all his enemies are made a footstool for his feet (Hebr. 1:13).
 - ❖ There should be a call to all in the congregation to acknowledge our total dependence on the Lord's care in all aspects of life and that without the loving fatherly care of the Lord we are helpless like fatherless orphans. It is characteristic of the wicked and unrighteous not to have room in their thoughts and plans for the Lord.
 - ❖ The rule of the Lord takes a very particular form in these psalms. The Lord rules through judgement. His might and power is not demonstrated in brute power and might. It is much rather seen in his just judgement that set the falsely accused and downtrodden free. The judgement that truly matters is the judgement of the King on his heavenly throne. Divine rule and power are manifested and most evident in the Lord's righteous attention for and care of those who call to him in pain, shame, hurt and humiliation. In these psalms it becomes therefore evident that judgement is a royal activity. God rules through his righteous judgement.
 - ❖ A central theme for these two psalms can be found in Psalm 9:5, 8: "You have sat on the throne giving righteous judgment"; "He has established his throne FOR JUDGEMENT". It is AS JUDGE that the Lord acts as warrior, fighting the cause of the afflicted.
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- ❖ God should be recognized as warrior in these psalms. In the words of Miller: “The power of this divine ruler to effect justice for the afflicted is indicated with the imagery of the warrior God. This is evident especially in 9:6-7: ...”⁴ In these verses we hear the language of war: “rebuked the nations”, “destroyed the wicked”, blotted out their name”, “the enemies ...vanished in everlasting ruins”, “their cities you have rooted out”, the very memory of them has perished”.
- ❖ The main message of these two psalms is nothing less than a declaration of the rule of the Lord as enduring, powerful over all and paired with that, the hope of the afflicted whose deliverance from the scorn of the wicked is clear evidence of this rule of the Lord.

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⁴ Miller, Patrick D. The way of the Lord – Essays in Old Testament theology. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Michigan, p. 174.

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