

The God of Justice

Psalm 94:1-23

Series: Exalt the LORD our God – Fall 2021

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Worship: Justice and Mercy

Key Sentence: The person who knows the God of justice can pursue true justice.

Outline:

I. The Need for Justice (Psalm 94:1-7)

II. The God of Justice (Psalm 94:8-11)

III. The Person of Justice (Psalm 94:12-15)

IV. The Pursuit of Justice (Psalm 94:16-23)

Psalm 94:1–23 O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth!
²Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve! ³O LORD,
how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? ⁴They pour out their
arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. ⁵They crush your people, O LORD, and
afflict your heritage. ⁶They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the
fatherless; ⁷and they say, “The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not
perceive.”

⁸Understand, O dullest of the people! Fools, when will you be wise? ⁹He who
planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see? ¹⁰He
who disciplines the nations, does he not rebuke? He who teaches man
knowledge— ¹¹the LORD—knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath.

¹²Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of
your law, ¹³to give him rest from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked.
¹⁴For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage; ¹⁵for
justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it.

¹⁶Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against
evildoers? ¹⁷If the LORD had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in
the land of silence. ¹⁸When I thought, “My foot slips,” your steadfast love, O
LORD, held me up. ¹⁹When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer
my soul. ²⁰Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who frame injustice by
statute? ²¹They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the
innocent to death. ²²But the LORD has become my stronghold, and my God the rock
of my refuge. ²³He will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for
their wickedness; the LORD our God will wipe them out.

The God of Justice

Psalm 94:1-23

Nearly every conflict in world history brought tragedy to innocent people. Nearly every conflict in the world today bodes ill for the innocent. This year “Open Doors” named Nigeria as one of the most dangerous places in the world to be a Christian. Thousands of Christian families have been murdered in violence that is partly tribal but more about the attempt of radical Islamicists to rule the Christian areas of the country. This is the same area where, in 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped 200 girls, mostly Christian, from a girl’s school, some of whom are still missing, some of whom were sold into Islamic sex slavery. It’s always the innocent who suffer. In the Nineveh plain of Iraq, historic home to the Yazidi Christian minority, the persecution by the Islamic State in 2015 rose to the point where it was classified as genocide. The Christian population of Iraq dropped from 1.4 million to less than 200,000 and most of those are still displaced. And again, it was the innocent who suffered, especially the young girls taken for sexual slavery by the Islamic overlords.

But this has always happened. As a student of World War 2 history I have read countless first hand accounts of Nazi cruelty to women, children and enslaved populations. Some years ago I told the story of the photo album, then recently found, showing the guards and the senior officers at Auschwitz partying and playing and having a jolly good time while the smoke of the Jews rose higher. Just last week while watching the Sing! Conference we saw the trailer for a new movie about Richard and Sabina Wurmbrand. They founded Voice of the Martyrs after his 14 year imprisonment in Communist Romania. This new movie is about the earlier years when they first became Christians and were persecuted by the Nazis because Wurmbrand was ethnically Jewish.

There is wickedness in the world. It delights in evil and harms the innocent. The Bible, of course, is very aware of this. God’s people often cry out for justice. They do so, the Bible says, because God is a God of justice even when injustice appears to have the upper hand. In our psalm for today, Psalm 94, the psalmist cries out for God’s justice to be shown, but personalizes it to himself. “Let me be a righteous person and let me have the courage to pursue justice for others.” Because it’s the person who knows the God of justice who can pursue true justice. Let me walk you through the outline. In the first seven verses of Psalm 94 we hear the psalmist lamenting the apparent victory of injustice. Verses 8-11, however, affirm that God is a God of justice who sees and hears every evil, even the evil thoughts of men.

In verses 12-15 the psalmist makes the personal turn, celebrating the blessings that come to the person who by God's grace is on the side of justice. Finally, verses 16-23 show how the psalmist relies on God as he pursues justice.

We begin with Psalm 94:1–7 *O LORD, God of vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth! ²Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve! ³O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? ⁴They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. ⁵They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage. ⁶They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless; ⁷and they say, "The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive."*

The psalmist immediately asserts that God is a God of vengeance, which is roughly equivalent to saying that he is a God of justice. Vengeance is the application of justice to the unjust. This is clear in verse 2 "Rise up, O judge of the earth; repay to the proud what they deserve." J. I. Packer, in *Knowing God* makes a brilliant move. Instead of having a chapter on the justice of God, he has one called "God the Judge." He turns our attention from an impersonal quality to the person who possesses that quality: "There are few things stressed more strongly in the Bible than the reality of God's work as Judge." But the Biblical use of this term is broader and more comprehensive than our use of the term. Packer says it involves four thoughts. First, "The judge is a person with authority. In the Bible world, the king was always the supreme judge, because his was the supreme ruling authority. He has, therefore, a right to make laws for us and to reward us according to whether or not we keep them. In most modern states, the legislature and the judiciary are divided, so that the judge does not make the laws he administers; but in the ancient world this was not so, and it is not so with God. He is both the Lawgiver and the Judge."

Second, perhaps most important, the judge is a person identified with what is good and right. The modern idea that a judge should be cold and dispassionate has no place in the Bible," which "leaves us no doubt that God loves righteousness and hates iniquity, and that the ideal of a judge wholly identified with what is good and right is perfectly fulfilled in him. So, when the psalmist calls God the judge of the earth he is calling on God to do what is good and right. There is no way that this judge could condemn the innocent or justify the wicked. Third, the judge is a person of wisdom, to discern truth. In the biblical setting, the judge's first task is to ascertain the facts in the case before him. When the Bible pictures God judging, it emphasizes his omniscience and wisdom as the searcher of hearts and finder of facts. Nothing can escape him; we may fool men, but we cannot fool God. He knows us, and judges us, as we really are."

Finally, the judge is a person of power to execute sentence. The modern judge does no more than pronounce the sentence. The same was true in the ancient world. But it is not true of God. He legislates. He sentences. He punishes. All judicial functions coalesce in him. This is why verse 2 makes sense: the judge of the earth is the one who repays to the proud what they deserve.

Having laid this groundwork, the psalmist now calls on God to be who he is. This is typical lament. We're told who God is but sometimes our circumstances push back on understanding. Verse 3: "O LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? ⁴They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast." Evildoers boast. Two years or so ago a movement started called "shout your abortion." Nicole wrote on April 13, 2019 "I am proud of my abortion because I made the right call without second guessing myself. I did what was right. I don't feel shame or guilt or wrong." Abortion providers boast. Rewire news featured a Planned Parenthood worker in New York saying "I'm a proud abortion provider." Now I know abortion is not the only kind of injustice, and Christians have been guilty of injustice too, but murder of innocent children is a pretty fundamental injustice. Some are proud of it.

God is concerned with the affliction of the innocent. Verses 5 and 6: "They crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage. ⁶They kill the widow and the sojourner, and murder the fatherless." This is the kind of injustice that arouses God and ought to arouse us and often arouses even non-believers. This is evil committed against the innocent. The first examples I gave were of those who crush God's people and afflict his heritage. Whether that is happening in Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria or China, we can and should agree with God the judge that such evils are grievous. We ought to take voice and action against them. But it would be wrong to limit our concern only to Christians, for all people are made in the image of God, and wherever a group of people is oppressed it is offensive to the judge of the earth. So I applaud World magazine, and others, who have highlighted China's attempted genocide of the Uyghur people. They are a Muslim people, but they are being ruthlessly incarcerated and mass sterilized in an attempt to wipe them out. They deserve justice.

In the same way, when people of color here in the United States don't get the same justice as white people, when the innocent are placed on death row because they are people of color, when laws still exist that are biased against people of color, it is offensive to the judge of the earth. Does this mean that I agree with Critical Race theory and Critical Social Justice. No, it doesn't. We talked about that last summer. Critical Race and other Critical theories grow out of a post-modern worldview that is antithetical to a Biblical world view.

But we can't throw out the Biblical baby with the secular bathwater. Biblical justice for individuals and peoples is still God's heart. Here, for example, the psalmist includes the sojourner with the widow and fatherless as those who deserve Biblical justice. The closest analog to a sojourner in our day is an immigrant. God's repeated calls for compassion, care and special grace to the sojourner should impact our hearts toward care for those escaping from oppressive situations whether in Afghanistan, Nigeria or drug-ridden Central America. Do I approve of open borders? No. But I do believe our immigration laws can be changed to make immigration more available and easier, especially for those oppressed in their native lands.

But those inclined toward evil are willing to ignore the Biblical teaching on justice and righteousness because, verse 7, "they say, "The LORD does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive." In other words, "Where is your God now?" This was an early internet meme, usually very poorly done in my opinion, but based on a common taunt in Biblical times. Malachi 2:17 "You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, 'How have we wearied him?' By saying, 'Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.' Or by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?'" Even Jesus, we know, was mocked this way. "He trusted in God; let God deliver him now, if he delights in him." Evil flourishes when the God of justice is ignored.

The psalmist sees the need for justice, the need for God the judge to address the tragic evil perpetrated all around him. In the second section of our text he asserts that the God of justice still sees this evil. Verses 8 to 11: *Understand, O dullest of the people! Fools, when will you be wise? ⁹He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see? ¹⁰He who disciplines the nations, does he not rebuke? He who teaches man knowledge—¹¹the LORD—knows the thoughts of man, that they are but a breath.*

These verses are what Packer was talking about in his third point, "the judge is a person of wisdom, to discern truth." That's what the psalmist means when he says "He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see?" The answer to the rhetorical question is "Yes." He does hear. He does see. Nothing is hidden from him, not even your inward thoughts, not even the inward scheming and gloating of the wicked. The LORD knows the thoughts of all people. The book of Hebrews in the New Testament tells us "Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." If God sees, if God hears, and if God judges, it is foolish to think you can get away with murder, or with any other sin or evil or oppression.

One of my favorite Ben Shive songs, “Rise Up,” captures the truth of God’s promised justice. “Every stone that makes you stumble and cuts you when you fall, every serpent here that strikes your heel to curse you when you crawl, the King of Love one day will crush them all. And every sad seduction and every clever lie, every word that woos and wounds the pilgrim children of the sky, The King of Love will break them by and by. And you will rise up in the end. You will rise up in the end. I know the night is cruel, but the day is coming soon, And you will rise up in the end. If the thief had come to plunder when the children were alone, if he ravaged every daughter and murdered every son, would not their father see this? Would not his anger burn? And would he not repay the tyrant in the day of his return? Await, await the day of his return. ‘Cause he will rise up in the end. He will rise up in the end. I know you need a savior, And he is patient in his anger, But he will rise up in the end.”

There is a need for justice. There is a God of justice. But the question the psalmist now turns to is “are we people of justice?” Verses 12-15 *Blessed is the man whom you discipline, O LORD, and whom you teach out of your law, ¹³to give him rest from days of trouble, until a pit is dug for the wicked. ¹⁴For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage; ¹⁵for justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it.*

God is a God of justice, but also a God of mercy. A huge part of his mercy is that he disciplines us rather than giving us strictly what we deserve for our sins. The word discipline implies “correction which results in education.” When we teach our children or when we teach someone a new skill we often say “no, that’s not quite right. Try doing it this way.” That’s what God does for us. It’s a huge blessing. He doesn’t condemn, but he teaches us out of his law. In the context of this Psalm those parts of the law that call for righteous behavior toward the innocent and the powerless are especially in view. In Job, as Job defends himself against the charge that he must be sinning to be so punished, he gives a remarkable description of the personal righteousness God teaches. He says “If I have withheld anything that the poor desired, or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail, ¹⁷or have eaten my morsel alone, and the fatherless has not eaten of it, . . . ¹⁹if I have seen anyone perish for lack of clothing, or the needy without covering, ²⁰if his body has not blessed me, and if he was not warmed with the fleece of my sheep, ²¹if I have raised my hand against the fatherless, knowing that I had influence in court, ²²then let my shoulder blade fall from my shoulder, and let my arm be broken from its socket.

Blessed is the person whom God teaches personal righteousness. The LORD gives that person rest from days of trouble, while a pit is dug for the wicked.

Derek Kidner points out that this verse would be at home in the book of Proverbs, which teaches that “Whoever misleads the upright into an evil way will fall into his own pit, but the blameless will have a goodly inheritance.” Kidner says “In God’s economy the pit dug for the wicked is largely dug by the wicked, yet this is not done in a day, nor without general havoc.”

Wickedness often triumphs for a day. But God is faithful. Verse 14: “For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage.” It may seem the innocent and powerless are trampled, that the cause of righteousness is mocked. In verse 5 the psalmist lamented that the wicked “crush your people, O LORD, and afflict your heritage.” But that’s not the last word. God is faithful to his promises. This word pair, “your people” and “your heritage” is common in Scripture. It is first used when the people of Israel sinned in the wilderness. Moses prayed “O Lord GOD, do not destroy your people and your heritage, whom you have redeemed through your greatness.” In the rest of the Old Testament God is at times angry with his people for their sins, but he is faithful to keep his promises and he is equally angry with those who would lay a hand on his people and his heritage. Again, this is a God of justice who does right.

Verse 15 “for justice will return to the righteous, and all the upright in heart will follow it.” God the Judge will ultimately bring justice to the innocent and the oppressed, and all those who see the justice of his ways will want to follow him. This is the psalmist making a personal commitment to justice, a personal commitment to righteousness. Though the wicked appear to triumph, he sees the goodness and blessing of God and resolves to follow in God’s ways.

So we’ve seen the need for justice, the wickedness that abounds in our broken world. We’ve seen that God sees. God doesn’t overlook evil. He will hold people accountable. We’ve seen that God’s justice is often administered in mercy not to destroy his people but to teach them to follow his ways. The last verses of the Psalm call us to pursue justice in dependence on God. Verses 16-23 *Who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers? ¹⁷If the LORD had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence. ¹⁸When I thought, “My foot slips,” your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up. ¹⁹When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul. ²⁰Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who frame injustice by statute? ²¹They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death. ²²But the LORD has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge. ²³He will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the LORD our God will wipe them out.*

Verse 16 makes the Psalm even more personal, but it's not clear who the person is. Most commentaries see a personal cry of the psalmist, looking for others to step up and come alongside him in his battle against wickedness. Finding no one, or an inadequate company, he sees in verse 17 that God is his only help. But there is another way to look at it, that the Lord himself speaks verse 16 to challenge the psalmist: "who rises up for me against the wicked? Who stands up for me against evildoers?" The psalmist wants to be that person but he realizes, as we must, that without the Lord's help, we are powerless.

Verse 17: "If the LORD had not been my help, my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence." When we speak out for the innocent, when we stand up for the oppressed, it is only the Lord's help that enables us. Without his help, we would stand mute in the middle of the oppression. This makes me think of the Christians in Nazi Germany when the Jews were being oppressed. Most of the church stood silent while the Jews were being defrauded, robbed and killed by the state. Only a few like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Barth, and Heinrich Grüber spoke against the anti-Christian and anti-Jewish policies of the state and the state church. They too might have lived "in the land of silence" on these issues, but according to their own testimonies, the LORD was their help.

Verse 18 and 19 detail this help: "When I thought, 'My foot slips,' your steadfast love, O LORD, held me up. ¹⁹When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul." Don't you love that? "I'm failing here, LORD, like a man about to slip down a muddy bank into a raging river, or off a high cliff to destruction. But what holds me up? Heseḏ, The steadfast love of the Lord." It is the reality of God's undeserved love poured out for us in His Son Jesus Christ that strengthens us to faithful following on the most treacherous path. Furthermore, he loves on us. "When the cares of my heart are many, your consolations cheer my soul." Do you feel that? Is that truth sweet to your heart? The consolations of the Lord, his promises, his presence, his power in our weakness, these are cheering to our souls.

Even when the government itself turns against us, we have this consolation. Verse 20: "Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who frame injustice by statute?" No. Yet the wicked are often in power. Tremper Longman says "Verse 20 may identify the focus of the trouble besetting the righteous, including the psalmist: a corrupt throne, a king who rules for his own desires rather than the good of the people. The book of Kings shows that many of the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah would qualify as corrupt and evil. A corrupt throne would issue decrees that bring misery rather than joy. Such laws would give opportunity to the wicked, while suppressing the righteous."

We see the same thing today, whether it is the Taliban in Afghanistan or the Islamic factions in Sub-Saharan Africa or the shift in our own government toward funding abortion or promoting transgender medical experiments on innocent children. These wicked rulers are not allied with God and they turn injustice into law. Verse 21 “They band together against the life of the righteous and condemn the innocent to death.” The most extreme example of this is that railroad siding at Auchwitz, where the women and children, the old and the frail were waved to the left, to the gas chambers, condemned to death, and only a few of the stronger Jews were given the dubious mercy of slave labor.

But the psalmist will not despair, and neither need we, for we know the character of our God and we find refuge in him. Verse 22: “But the LORD has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge.” The person who pursues justice cannot do it in his or her own strength. We must flee to the rock, we must hide in the stronghold, we must take refuge in the refuge. Who is the rock? Who is the stronghold? Who is the refuge? It is the LORD. There is no other. As the old chorus paraphrased Psalm 32, “You are my hiding place. You always fill my heart with songs of deliverance. Whenever I am afraid I will trust in you. Let the weak say ‘I am strong in the strength of the LORD.’”

And having said all this, the last word of the psalm returns where we began, with the assertion that there is justice, that there is a God of Justice and that this God is the righteous Judge to discern truth and execute judgment. Verse 23 “He will bring back on them their iniquity and wipe them out for their wickedness; the LORD our God will wipe them out.” We may not always see justice in our lifetimes. But a day is coming when the one who was born to us as a child and sacrificed for us as God and man, will return. Then the government will be on his shoulders. His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. ⁷Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.”

Amen? Amen. And while you wait, remember, that it is the person who knows the God of justice who can pursue true justice.