

## **“Break the Arm of the Wicked”**

*Psalm 10:1-18; Matthew 2:16-23*

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**B**eloved Congregation of Christ: Now that Christmas festivities are over, are you experiencing post-Christmas blues? One day, you're exchanging presents and enjoying cheesecake with your kids and grandkids, the next day, you're all alone in the house. This feeling is not merely something we read on the Internet or hear from friends, but is real. It happens to all of us.

The Christmas narrative seems to end in a similar letdown. There was exceeding joy when the angels sang joyfully, *“Glory to God in the highest!”* and the shepherds praised God after they saw the newborn Jesus. Then the wise men arrived with their gifts to worship the newborn *“king of the Jews.”* But events turned ominous when an angel instructs Joseph to flee from Bethlehem to Egypt because of King Herod's murderous scheme. Then it turns from ominous to mourning when Herod implements his scheme by murdering all infants in Bethlehem two years and younger.

Our main text today, Psalm 10, is another psalm of lament where the writer prays to God for justice against the wicked. In verses 1-11, the psalmist laments that the wicked seem to prosper as they oppress the righteous. Then in verses 12-15, the psalmist affirms his trust that God will help the righteous and calls on God to punish the wicked, saying, *“Break the arm of the wicked.”* Finally, in verses 16-18, he affirms that the LORD will rule in mercy, righteousness and justice.

But how is this related to our New Testament text about King Herod and his murderous rampage against the babies in Bethlehem? As we go through Psalm 10, we will see that King Herod is a prime example of the wicked man in this psalm.

### **The Wicked Rules (verses 1-11)**

As in many other psalms of lament, Psalm 10 begins with two Why questions, *“Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?”* Who among us have never asked these questions? As Christians, we're not accusing God when we ask questions like these. Rather, when great troubles beset us, they overwhelm us so much that God seems to be absent or not doing anything to comfort us. *“Are you still there? Do you still hear us?”* But another psalmist assures us, *“[The LORD] who keeps you . . . will neither slumber nor sleep”* (Psa 121:3-4).

In his lament, the psalmist catalogs the evil ways of the wicked man. First, he is described in similar ways: *“arrogant,” “boastful,” “proud,” “haughty.”* In his arrogance, he believes nothing can stop him from hunting down the weak. He is full of himself, boasting of his lusts, so he has no place for God in his life. He knows God exists, but he denies this reality, and even curses God! He approves of wicked people like him, and disregards God's law. Because he is godless, he is not

accountable to anyone, except himself. He boasts that he will always be prosperous and happy, no matter what evil he does against others. So he sneers in contempt of his enemies.

Second, not only is he arrogant and godless, he is also full of *“curses, lies, and threats.”* He intimidates and oppresses others with his threats. He devises deceitful schemes to gain power and profit. His promises are useless, because they are mere lies.

Third, the wicked man is violent, bloody and murderous. He lies in ambush like a lion, ready to prowl on unsuspecting, innocent prey, whether in the villages or in the wild. He schemes against the poor and the helpless to gain profit, even delighting when he crushes them.

The wicked man is arrogant and godless, full of lies, and murderous. Who is an eminent picture of this wicked man? Our New Testament text has the answer: King Herod. King Herod, also called Herod I and Herod the Great, was declared by Augustus Caesar as the “king of the Jews” in 37 B.C. He is the first of the Herodian kings of Palestine, but was a vassal king under the Roman Empire. He ruled until his death in 4 B.C., right after Jesus was born.

When the wise men from the east arrived in Jerusalem, they asked the people where the *“king of the Jews”* was born. The people were troubled, and Herod too, when he heard this. Herod thought his throne was in jeopardy, so he called all the chief priests and scribes to ask them where the Christ (Messiah) was to be born. They knew it was in Bethlehem from the prophecy of Micah 5:2. Herod was cunning. He summoned the wise men to ask them when the star had appeared. The wise men came from Babylon or Persia, about 600-800 miles east of Jerusalem. If they traveled 20 miles a day – or less if their caravan was big – it would have taken them about 40 days or even a few months to reach Jerusalem. He told the wise men to tell him where the baby was, so he too *“may come and worship him.”*

This was vintage Herod. Like the wicked man in Psalm 10, he had absolute power in his kingdom. He was a descendant of Edom or Esau, so he was not a Jew. Because he was a foreign oppressor, the Jews hated him. To appease them, Herod converted to the Jewish religion. He even renovated the temple to restore it to its original glory. But all these were pure deceit. He was a godless man. His record is a laundry list of assassinations, murders, revenge and oppression. When he was just a child, he personally executed the man who killed his father, Antipater, a high official of Edom. After he became king, he executed 45 rival Hasmonean priests. He had five wives, but executed his second wife Mariamne I, on suspicion of adultery. He also executed Mariamne’s mother, all his brothers, and three of his own son, and several of his own officials, all on suspicion of conspiracy. This long list of heinous crimes leaves no doubt that he would have had no qualms in murdering the months-old Jesus, together with an estimated 20 children in Bethlehem who were two years old and younger.

After his death shortly after Jesus was born, his kingdom was divided among his three sons: Herod Antipas in Galilee, Herod Archelaus in Judea, and Philip in Perea. Antipas and Archelaus took after their father’s wickedness. Antipas beheaded John the Baptist and participated in the

mock trial of Jesus. Archelaus massacred 3,000 worshipers in the temple who had rioted against him. That is why Joseph took his family to Nazareth in Galilee, instead of Bethlehem in Judea.

Today, we see the wickedness of Herod everywhere. Terrorists murder thousands. Shooters kill helpless children in the schools. But the most wicked acts are against hundreds of thousands of unborn children massacred every year. These abortion clinics are more wicked than Herod.

### **The Righteous Prays (verses 12-15)**

Because of the arrogance, godlessness and violence of the wicked, the psalmist pleads to God in verse 12, *“Arise, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand; forget not the afflicted.”* He pleads to God to intervene on behalf of the righteous against the wicked. In his arrogance, the wicked man thinks that God has forgotten the righteous (verse 12); that he is not accountable to God (verse 13); and that he will always be prosperous, and no trouble will come to him (verses 5 and 6).

What does the psalmist pray for? He prays that the LORD God will use his “hand,” his might, to help the afflicted. His prayer is based on God’s righteousness: God sees the evil works of the wicked. He appeals to God because he trusts that God will help the helpless, exemplified by the orphan. Then he prays for their destruction, *“Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer.”* In the Psalms, we find a few of these kinds of prayers against God’s enemies: *“Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever; let them perish in disgrace”* (Psa 83:17); *“Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow; let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg”* (Psa 109:9-10).

But doesn’t Christ contradict these imprecations when he commands us to *“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”*? (Matt 5:44). What then are we to pray for? First, like the psalmist, we must pray that God’s justice be done. It is God who acts, who exacts vengeance, not us, if not in this age, in the age to come. And second, we are not to pray for God’s vengeance on our personal enemies. Instead, we are to pray for their salvation, as Paul exhorts us, *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them”* (Rom 12:14, 21).

This is the prayer of lament of Jeremiah when the Israelites were taken captive to Babylon. There was weeping and mourning in Ramah, a city north of Jerusalem along the route to Babylon. When Jeremiah wrote, *“Rachel weeping for her children”* (Jer 31:15), he was referring back to Rachel as she was dying when she was giving birth to a son. She knew she was dying, so she named him “Ben-oni,” which means, *“son of my sorrow.”* But Jacob renamed him later as “Benjamin,” which means *“son of the right hand.”* In the next verse, Jeremiah wrote had a word of comfort, *“Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears, for there is a reward for your work . . . and they shall come back from the land of the enemy.”* Israel will be restored back to Canaan.

Therefore, we are to weep and mourn when our brothers and sisters in Christ are persecuted and martyred by God’s enemies in the Middle East, Africa and Asia. We are to weep and mourn when our own family and friends remain captive and enslaved by sin. We are to pray for their

deliverance from the tyranny of the devil. And we are to be thankful that we have been delivered from slavery to sin, and from eternal death and hell.

### **God Destroys the Wicked, Delivers the Righteous (verses 16-18)**

In the conclusion in verses 16-18, the psalmist declares his trust in God's deliverance and justice. God hears the prayers of his people who are afflicted physically, spiritually, emotionally.

Here the psalmist contrasts the end of the righteous and the wicked. God grants the desire of the righteous. The righteous desire to be with God, to commune with God, to read and listen to God's Word. We desire to worship God every Lord's Day because God dwells with his people here. He gives his Word to us here. We praise God here with songs of adoration and thanksgiving. We pray together here. And we partake of Christ's body and blood here on Communion Sundays.

In contrast, the wicked's only desire is money, possessions, power and fame. His delight is to commune with other wicked people like him, *"to walk in the counsel of the wicked, to stand in the way of sinners, and sit in the seat of scoffers"* (Psa 1:1). To him, the Word of God is all foolishness and an offense to his pleasures. His songs are not songs in praise of God, but songs glorifying violence, sex, disobedience and disorder. He does not celebrate Christ's body and blood, but spends his time in gluttonous eating and drowning in drunkenness with his fellow wicked men.

So the psalmist encourages us when we troubles come to us, but we see all the prosperity and success of the wicked. While their wealth and power may continue in this age, the LORD's just and righteous rule is forever and ever. Because he is just, the godless "nations" will perish, which means eternity in hell. They will be removed or "vomited" out of God's earth, the new heavens and earth (Rev 22:15), just as Israel was vomited out of the Promised Land because of their rebellion against him (Lev 20:22). In contrast, the rule of the wicked will end, and the righteous will be given rest in God's dwelling-place (Rev 21:3). God will redeem and defend the helpless and those oppressed by the wicked.

**D**ear Friends, continue praying, and pray without ceasing when troubles come, because God does not sleep nor slumber. He hears your prayers every day, every Lord's Day. He knows the desire of your hearts. He listens to your cries.

At times, when great afflictions come, God may seem to be distant. He may seem to have forgotten you. But he is near in your time of need. He does not forget you. Just as he fulfilled all his promises to Abraham and Israel, he will fulfill all his promises to you, his people.

Jesus, on the night before he was crucified for our sins, was greatly sorrowful. But his comfort was praying to his Father in heaven, *"And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground"* (Luke 22:44). Therefore, Paul has these words of encouragement to us, *"[pray] at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints"* (Eph 6:18).