

PSALMS OF THE PENDULUM

Psalms 9; 10

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We're going to take together Psalm 9 and Psalm 10. This is kind of lengthy. We'll not spend time on every word in every verse but try to put the landscape of these psalms in major relief for us.

I'm going to call these two psalms, Psalms of the Pendulum. The reason why is they're written evidently by the same persons—David. Psalm 9 strikes one side of the pendulum, which is an upbeat side. A positive side. The side of encouragement, thanksgiving and things going too great. I'm happy and all my enemies are being defeated. God is judge and the whole world is fair and ordered and just and I think life's great. Psalm 10 immediately following is the other side of the pendulum—the downbeat side, the despair side and life is awful and the good people are trodden under and people who don't love God who are cheats and crooks are prospering. And, God, what are You going to do about this awful situation? That's the psalms of the pendulum.

If you haven't experienced that in your life yet, get ready.

Let me make some introductory remarks to try to understand them as a unit. One of the reasons why we're taking the two psalms together is that in the Hebrew David uses an acrostic device in writing these psalms. In Psalm 9 he begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and goes through every other verse giving a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In Psalm 9 there are eleven different letters of the Hebrew alphabet he uses except for verse 7. He skips the fourth letter, which is the D. Other than that he's got eleven letters in sequence. When he begins Psalm 10 he picks up with the twelfth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Those succeeding letters would seem to suggest that these two psalms may have been part of one unit.

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On the other hand he breaks off the acrostic after 10:1 and there's only scarce traits of other alphabetical divisions in the rest of chapter 10. So for that reason these psalms have sometimes been considered linked together.

Also there is no superscription for Psalm 10. There is one for Psalm 9. That again suggests that at one time there was not a separate division for the psalms.

Also the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, as well as the Latin translation, the Vulgate, combine these psalms. Therefore if you read in the Catholic Bible for example from here on the psalms will be numbered differently in the Catholic Bible than they are in the typical Protestant Bibles. That's because Psalms 9 and 10 are combined based on the Vulgate, based on the Septuagint. The Hebrew of the Bible however separates these psalms. That's why they're separated in the Protestant editions.

There's also another thing that unites them. Psalm 9 finds David dealing with enemies that seem to be external to Israel. He especially in that psalm seems to be giving thanks over a most recent triumph. We're not told what the triumph particularly was. Just there has been a victory over an enemy.

However Psalm 10 deals with internal enemies. People within the land that do not have a faith in God and that are violating the commandments, yet are prospering. The psalmist at that point is very confused as to why God is letting this happen and people who are living right are being walked over.

One other thing that could be said about these psalms is like the other psalms we've considered so far. These are meant to be sung. The Hebrew says, "to be sung to the tune of the death of the son." Psalm 9 is especially kind of upbeat so it doesn't seem death of the son means a liturgical thing. Perhaps some have suggested that it really wasn't a victory over an external enemy. It was

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a victory over Absalom and when David finally came to himself after his time of grief was over; there was this vibrant song of thanksgiving that he gave to God for the victory. We don't know.

I. Let's look at the first side of the pendulum, Psalm 9, the pendulum of praise.

Since the psalm is an acrostic it is not as easy to divide it in terms of an outline progression of thought. He appears at times to be fitting his thoughts more to the literary device of linking it with the next letter of the alphabet. But even given that disadvantage you can pick up some clear gradations of thought and reflection in this praise.

A. For example, the first two verses form a general statement of praise. "I will praise you, O LORD, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonders. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High" (Psalm 9:1–2, NIV). The reason why that can be called a general statement of praise is that it is not linked to any specific thing that God has done. It's simply the giving forth to Him of adoration. We might just raise a question as we get into this general statement of praise as why it is that God is so interested in praise. The psalms are filled with praises. The New Testament and the hymns of the Book of Revelation are filled with praise. The whole language is praise to God. Is God on some kind of an ego trip that all the time He has to be talked up, encouraged that He is good? Why this emphasis on praise?

I don't think the emphasis is on praise because there's any deficiency in God. I need praise at times and encouragement because there's deficiency in me and I need to be reminded once in a while that I'm not some ogre. For any of you who struggle with low self-esteem you know how important it is that somebody speaks a good word to you. Fortunately there are people around me telling me how well I do things. And that helps encourage me even though I know that at times they don't really mean the good things they say. But we need praise. Praise builds us up and

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criticism tears us down. The most effective way you can use to change anyone is to praise them and not to tear them up.

Perhaps the Lord knowing that how we relate to other people is greatly derived in how we relate to Him allows us to approach Him in a language of praise. Not because He needed it but maybe because we need it. God can exist for all eternity without ever being deficient if I fail to praise Him. That's not going to rain on His day if I don't praise Him. He's got enough angels around Him. The fact is that He's condescended to love me and wants my praise. But He may not need it but my life is ruined if I never thank the Creator. If I live life in the pits. If I extend that to the people around me, look at them in caustic and critical eyes. So God allows praise.

Our praise is given therefore not because God is selfish or because He needs to be told how good and great He is. But because we need to remind ourselves of what a great God we are serving.

We need the building up too that we're giving to God.

God wants us to have a natural instinct of wonder and adoration. To have an attitude of our life of gratitude. Let that attitude of wonder and adoration affect our attitudes toward other people and toward ourselves.

There are six different component parts of these two verses.

1. There is the decision to praise, "I will praise you." I'm sure you've found in your life there are times when praise to the Lord is not going to be coming out of the feeling level but out of the volitional level. We choose to do it. So here is the decision to praise.

2. There is the extent of the praise—"with all my heart." Not that my praise would be one that comes from a person whose artery is blocked but that the arteries of our spiritual life are all wide open to God. And God has access to every part of our being and all of praise to Him. Not a half-hearted kind of praise but a genuine, deep praise to God.

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3. Then there's the expanse of the praise—"all your wonders." Everything that He's done.
4. Then the enjoyment of praise—"be glad and rejoice" so that praise isn't just coming from a heart that is passive, neutral, going through the motions of offering praise.
5. There's a means of praise—"I will sing."
6. Then finally the object of praise—"O Most High."

The praise is given for both who God is and what God does. The praise is to God Most High and for what He does, all His wonders. I will decide to praise, I will have extent to my praise, I will be expansive in my praise and find many ways to praise God as I can, I will enjoy praise, I will employ the means of praise of singing and I will direct my praise to God as the object of praise. That's the general statement of praise.

B. Then verses 3–6 constitute a specific reason for praise. "My enemies turn back; they stumble and perish before you. For you have upheld my right and my cause; you have sat on your throne, judging righteously" (Psalm 9:3–4, NIV).

If you have a problem with the Old Testament word "enemy" (and we're taught now to love our enemies and that love now transcends those bitter things and the different ways of God working in the Old Testament compared to the New Testament), someone has suggested that psalms become more meaningful to us when we put the word "problems" instead of the word "enemies." I kind of like that. Our problems really are our enemies. We can say, "My problems turn back. They stumble and perish and You have rebuked my problems and destroyed them. You have totally erased my problems forever and ever. Endless ruin has overtaken all the things that were bothering me. You've uprooted all those difficulties. Even my being able to remember them has been lost."

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Total victory. There are great moments in life where we see God intersect our lives and grant such tremendous victories that it does indeed bring this kind of sensation. God, if You win this one You've won everything.

Look at the contrast between what he says in verses 3–6 and what he says in 10:1. “Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (NIV). In one moment he's saying, “God, all my problems are over. Praise Your name.” And the next moment it's, “I'm about to go under. Where are You?” I would suggest that great victories are often followed by great depression. And great depressions are followed by great victories.

If you look at the Gospels you'll see this pattern. Jesus is baptized and the Holy Spirit has descended in the form of a dove upon Him, the voice comes from heaven. Then the next minute in the wilderness forty days tempted by Satan. One moment He's speaking to 5,000. Hours later at night the disciples are fighting for their life in the storm at sea. One moment Peter is saying, “You are the Lord.” And the next moment Jesus is saying, “I'm going to the cross.” One moment He's on the Mount of Transfiguration and His appearance is radiant and His divine nature shows through and the next moment He's in the bottom of the valley with a raging demoniac whom His disciples could not cure. One moment it's feast and the next moment it's famine.

The process too can be reversed. One moment it's crucifixion and the next it's resurrection.

There is that sing-song pendulum quality here. Here David is honest with his emotions. He's had a great victory and he's effusive in his victory. If you can hang on in your low time, the people who last in the storms are around to sing the next praise.

C. Verses 7–12 find an assurance in praise. His assurance in God runs deeper than the fact that God just did something for him lately. His assurances run ahead at the fact that God holds all the nations and in that great day of His judgment He will even all scores. “The LORD reigns forever;

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he has established his throne for judgment. He will judge the world in righteousness; he will govern the peoples with justice. The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know your name will trust in you, for you, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek you. Sing praises to the LORD, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done. For he who avenges blood remembers; he does not ignore the cry of the afflicted” (NIV).

Let’s again look at some different aspects of David’s assurance in praise.

One assurance is the permanence of God’s reign. It lasts forever. Therefore in a moment in Psalm 10 David is going to get in real deep waters of his emotional life that has been preceded by an assurance that God is not even going to for a moment abdicate his throne.

Then there is the justice in his reign. Righteousness. There is the help given in His reign. He is a refuge and a stronghold. Those words are not necessarily synonyms. To be in a refuge may be in a very vulnerable place. God provides for the oppressed both a refuge and a stronghold. A stronghold is a place that is easily defended and cannot be taken.

Security in His reign. Never be forsaken. The scope of His reign. It’s over the nations. And the judgment in His reign. He avenges blood.

That term “avenge blood” takes us back to the Book of Genesis where God says to Cain that the blood of his brother Abel cries out to him from the ground. From that time on God requires an answer for all those who do wrong. And will avenge the blood of those slain. So what the psalmist is saying in his “avenging blood” term is that God will require justice from everyone in this great day. So David looks ahead and he is assured in praise because the Lord will reign permanently because there’s justice to His reign, because He gives help and security, because the scope of His reign is over all the nations and there is judgment and justice to His reign.

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D. Verses 13–14 constitute the fourth section of this psalm if we're trying to outline it. That is, these two verses constitute a confident plea for help. David switches moods almost immediately because whereas he had said in verse 6 that endless ruin has overtaken the enemy and their cities have been uprooted and even the memory of them has perished. Lo and behold we come to verses 13 and 14 and his enemies are still very much alive. "O LORD, see how my enemies persecute me! Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death, that I may declare your praises in the gates of the Daughter of Zion and there rejoice in your salvation" (NIV).

David has two references to gates here. If God doesn't help him he's going to go down and be subject to the gates of death. He asks God to lift him up to the gates of the daughter of Zion, which is a reference to security in the city of Jerusalem. That he may there rejoice in his salvation.

So although enemies have been defeated, they're reappearing on the horizon. There is a plea for help.

E. The psalm concludes with a concluding word of trust. Verses 15–20. "The nations have fallen into the pit they have dug; their feet are caught in the net they have hidden. The LORD is known by his justice; the wicked are ensnared by the work of their hands. *Higgaion. Selah* The wicked return to the grave, all the nations that forget God. But the needy will not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the afflicted ever perish. Arise, O LORD, let not man triumph; let the nations be judged in your presence. Strike them with terror, O LORD; let the nations know they are but men. *Selah*" (NIV).

What this part is saying in a concluding word of trust is whereas in verses 7–12 David has looked forward to that great day when God is going to judge the nations, now in these verses he's saying we don't have to wait until that great day to see Your judgment for already You're working. The

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traps that evil people have laid for others they're getting snared in themselves. David is recognizing that very practical thing that operates within human society. That the people that do wrong are often ensnared in what they have laid for others. The psalmist is saying if you give the person enough rope they'll hang themselves. The problem is they don't always live long enough to hang themselves. The righteous are looking saying, "It's not fair." That's why we need the future judgment because God will ultimately do that.

Then he goes on to say, "The wicked return to the grave" (Psalm 9:17, NIV). That's an unusual phrase. He doesn't say the wicked go to the grave. That would be natural. But return. If they return that means they came from the grave, which is his whole point. People who do wrongly prove that they are really people of death. They are people who really belong to *Sheol* for they've demonstrated it all their life so they're simply going back to where they naturally should go anyway. The needy do not go to the grave. They only seem to be forgotten. God will arise. And He'll strike with terror those who are against Him but He will remember and place at the gates of the daughter of Zion those who love Him. The psalm closes on that kind of encouraging note. God is going to arise and not let man triumph.

Now are you ready to be depressed?

II. From the pendulum of praise we go to the pendulum of despair.

A. Psalm 10 begins with a cry of lament. It's the Book of Job all over again. "Why, O LORD, do you stand far off?" (verse 1, NIV). That phrase suggests one who is detached. Who sees something going on that is far away and chooses not to intervene. "Why do you hide yourself?" That's more than standing off. That's getting out of range where you can see what's going on. "Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?" (Psalm 10:2, NIV).

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One of the things I like about David is his honesty. God doesn't ask us to pretend like we don't have emotions. It's ok for us as God's people to go from the pendulum of praise to the pendulum of despair. God understands that. God lets us do that. If we try to bottle up those emotions and pretend like they don't exist we can get in a lot of spiritual trouble. I'd rather have somebody authentically depressed than someone who's trying to sublimate their depression by pretending to be happy when they're not. That will wind up kicking you in the teeth.

B. That's then followed by a catalog of complaint, verses 2–11. This is a classic catalog of complaint. It's basically "Poor me." "I look around," David is saying, "and I'm getting dumped on in life and all the people that aren't serving you who could care less about you have got it made. That's not fair." Verses 2–11 are probably if you were going to look in Scripture for a description of secular humanist or the person who lives by the "playboy philosophy" or the "me first" code or the "I'm rich and well off and I don't care about anybody else and there isn't any God anyway." If you want a description of that person this is the classic place in the Bible that has it.

There are two kinds of atheists. This person is one. There is a theoretical atheist and there's the functional atheist. The theoretical atheist is the one who as a matter of religious principle says there is no God. He can actually be a person who in their own relationships of life is highly moral. There have been some highly moral atheists.

The functional atheist is the person who says by my own conduct I don't care if God exists or not because I'll never be hauled into account and I'm going to do what I want. The functional atheist makes no attempt at all to live by any moral code and certainly not by any code that will come from outside himself from a God who exists.

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“In his arrogance [a functional atheist] hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. He boasts of the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the LORD. In his pride [the functional atheist] does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God. His ways are always prosperous; he is haughty and your laws are far from him; he sneers at all his [problems]. He says to himself, ‘Nothing will shake me; I will always be happy and never have trouble’” (Psalm 10:2–6, NIV).

By the way we’re in on a secret. We know that he can’t say that always. There’s going to come a moment when he’s going to have the death rattle too.

“His mouth is full of curses and lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue. He lies in wait near the villages; from ambush he murders the innocent” (Psalm 10:7–8, NIV).

Actually in our society he gobbles up people in the law courts and has a shrewd attorney who knows how to milk people with crooked contracts. And financial schemes where he walks off with the money while they walk off with bad paper.

“Watching in secret for his victims. He lies in wait like a lion in cover; he lies in wait to catch the helpless; he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net. His victims are crushed, they collapse; they fall under his strength. He says to himself, ‘God has forgotten; he covers his face and never sees’” (Psalm 10:8–10, NIV).

I think verse 6 and 11 are particularly illuminating for they reveal the self-talk of the functional atheist. “Nothing will shake me. God has forgotten.”

This is David’s complaint. He was going through sorrow. I’m sure when you’ve got a very serious illness and you’ve tried to serve God with all your heart and you see people living into their late years full of strength and they’ve never served God, where’s the scale of justice, God?

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When you work like crazy to make a living and someone else comes along and wins the lottery, this is not fair.

I don't think you can ever feel these kinds of psalms unless you've been on the short stick.

Otherwise you're just looking at them theoretically. When you watch in pain yourself and said, It's not right.

C. So this cry of lament and this catalog of complaint is followed by a call for help. "Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless. Why does the wicked man revile God? Why does he say to himself, 'He won't call me to account'?" (Psalm 10:12–13, NIV).

It's interesting. As David begins to call upon the Lord he's saying, "Not all this guy's reasoning is correct."

"But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless" (Psalm 10:14). Then he says, "Break the arm of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness" (verse 15, NIV).

Several comments here. By asking God for help we, when we do this, are recognizing innately where God stands on the issue. That God is not on the side of those who have everything ok but are denying Him. But that God takes His place with us who although we are trusting Him yet still have these overwhelming problems we don't see easy answers to. We know that. By also praying in a time like this we're putting ourselves on the side of where God is. We're saying, "I don't care if that person's got all the gold in Fort Knox, I wouldn't trade places with him." The saint in his right mind in his time of despair still would not trade that with someone who's got it made and is saying there is no God. But we do feel at times saying, "Break the arm of the wicked" (verse 15, NIV).

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We have so much more advantage now because we have the New Testament. I feel sorrow for David. He never had the advantage of Romans 8 which tells us so much more about getting through suffering that God is working for the good, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us. That the present suffering we're going through cannot be compared to the way of glory that's coming. That God is for us. If He's for us, who can be against us? What an advantage we have in light of what Christ has done for us. Call for help, verses 12–15.

D. Then the last part of Psalm 10 finds him with again his faith at rest. “The LORD is King for ever and ever; the nations will perish from his land. You hear, O LORD, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more” (Psalm 10:16–18, NIV). It's interesting that probably nothing dramatic has changed in his circumstances. The psalms conclude and we have no idea at all that anything external has changed. But somehow getting into the presence of the Lord and venting everything has helped bring a stabilization in our life. So he is able to say a different thing than he said in verse 1. He's saying the Lord is King forever. And he uses four verbs of the Lord. He hears, He encourages, He listens (which is a stronger form of hearing) and He defends.

What is this psalm telling us to do when we feel that life is not fair? The bottom line it's telling us three things. One, tell God exactly how you feel. It's ok. Tell Him. Don't bottle it up. Get it out. And then we go to a second stage: reaffirm what's true about God. That's what David does especially in verse 14. “You, O God, do see trouble and grief” (NIV). He's started out by saying, “Why are You hiding Yourself?” Now he's coming to himself, “Lord, You do see it. You do consider it.” When we're going through tough times in our life we need to take a moment and reaffirm “God, You do know.”

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Then I think the third thing that this psalm teaches us is that we will always choose to identify with God rather than with wrong. David takes a stand on that. He's not interested in trading places.

Psalm of the pendulum. God help us in the pendulum. If you've ever been on the pendulum I hope you've been on the Psalm 9 side. Never on the Psalm 10 side.

Closing Prayer

Lord, there's a division in the house tonight. Some of us are in Psalm 9 and some in Psalm 10 because of a particular moment in our life. Some of us just feel that the sun and moon and stars shine on us and there's never been a moment when we've been in the pink more than right now. We're delighted with who we are and where we are. We feel great. Thank You for this, Lord. Thank You for those beautiful moments when there is great enjoyment and great space. You have enlarged us. You've made a place for us where there's lots of room. That's a feel good time. Thank You for those times, Lord. Thank You that You reign in those times. Lord, others of us are on the other side of the pendulum where we wish things were different than they are. We cry to You and You seem to be awfully far away. We're tempted to feel like You're hiding. It's not a "snap your fingers" process where we come out of that and get to the point of rest and faith. We do a lot of struggling. Lord, Your Spirit helps us in those times. We always come through those times right side up because we know that You are God who cares about us. We wouldn't trade places with anybody.

As hard as it is to go through some things in life we look back and we wouldn't trade those experiences either. That's what makes us. That's what makes our relationship with You special. You carved Your personality into our life in those times. We are a creation of You. It is those deep gashes in the carving You are making that produce beauty that we'll be able to see. If not

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now then later. There is not a single one of us that will not emerge in Your courts as a scared vessel. Or an incomplete master piece. You will carve Your work of grace all over our life in such a deep and individualistic way that we will find for all eternity for the praise of Your glory. A work of Your creativity that has splendor and beauty and meaning. Thank You that You're doing that in us. Even in our down times. We will be for the praise of Your glory. Protect us in those times. Help us to say from our heart "God, You're King forever and ever." Just because in my particular situation Your help has been delayed doesn't mean You're abandoning Your rule and Your reign and Your authority. You are the King. Forever and ever. As Your subject I'll say You are my God and my Lord. I will serve You even when I do not understand You. I will serve You. Thank You for Your grace, for Your love. Praise Your name, Lord.