



Psalm 94 - God the Avenger of the Righteous

Introduction

This is a community lament, for a time when the wicked not only exult but also oppress the faithful, many of whom are socially weak, doing so with no fear of God. The song asks God to take action to protect the faithful. At the same time, it strengthens the pious to endure this oppression without losing heart or going over to join the wicked; it does this by recounting God's exhaustive knowledge of all that people think, do, and say; by remembering God's steadfast love for his own; and by rejoicing in God's righteous commitment to bring justice by caring for the weak and putting down the wicked. Thus the godly can view their current circumstances as God's discipline, even while they pray for deliverance.

The wicked in this psalm are members of God's people who in their hearts do not believe in the God of the covenant. They seem to have political power, or at least influence with the ruling authorities, which enables them to crush the faithful. Although such wicked persons are in one sense members of the covenant people, they are distinguished from God's true people or heritage and will suffer the full force of God's judgement.

It puzzles scholars why this psalm is placed here, interrupting the sequence of divine kingship psalms (Psalms 93 and 95-99). Perhaps the simplest explanation is that God's powerful kingship guarantees his final victory over all who oppose him, even if they are members of his own people who ought to have acknowledged his rule! It is always worth being on God's side.

Psalm 94:1-3 - O Lord, Pay the Proud as They Deserve.

The psalm opens by addressing the Lord as God of vengeance, asking him to repay to the proud what they deserve. As the song develops, it will be clear who these 'proud' are and why it is right to pray that God will 'pay them back.'

¹ O Lord, you God of vengeance,
you God of vengeance, shine forth!

Psalm 94:1

O Lord, you God of vengeance. The psalmist began with the simple and profound recognition that vengeance belongs to God. He sees and judges righteously among mankind and will bring vengeance as appropriate:

- This means that vengeance does not belong to man.
- This means that vengeance belongs to one who sees more than we see and knows more than we know.
- This means it is appropriate to ask God to dispense vengeance and trust His superior knowledge, wisdom, and timing in doing so.

In Jeremiah 51:56 God takes the title, the 'God of recompense' and assures, he will surely 'repay in full'.

You God of vengeance, shine forth! The repetition of the request adds more than emphasis and intensity. It also connects God's vengeance with His glory, His shining forth. In the end, vengeance upon sin and sinners is part of God's own glory.

The notion of vengeance here is founded on God's justice: he brings his righteous judgement on those who oppose him and harm his people: <<*Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; because the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly*>> (Deuteronomy 32:35), and: <<*the God who gave me vengeance and subdued peoples under me*>> (Psalm 18:47). It is forbidden for individuals to take personal vengeance: <<*You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord*>> (Leviticus 19:18), and: <<*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'*>> (Romans 12:19), but one function of the civil government is to ensure just vengeance against wrongdoers: <<*When a slave-owner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished*>> (Exodus 21:20), and: <<*For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer*>> (Romans 13:3-4) – a function not being carried out in the context of this psalm. God will carry out vengeance against those who despise him: <<*For it is indeed just of God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to the afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with*

his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus>> (2 Thessalonians 1:6-8), and the faithful will rejoice because God's justice has been vindicated: <<The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked>> (Psalm 58:10), <<Why should the nations say, 'Where is their God?' Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes>> (Psalm 79:10), and: <<When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?''>> (Revelation 6:9-10). There is no double standard: <<God will judge the unfaithful among his own people as well as the Gentiles: O Lord our God, you answered them; you were a forgiving God to them, but an avenger of their wrongdoings>> (Psalm 99:8).

- ² Rise up, O judge of the earth;
give to the proud what they deserve!
- ³ O Lord, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked exult?

Psalm 94:2-3

The people called proud here are not simply those among the faithful who commit the sin of pride; rather, in their unbelief they exalt themselves against God, defying him to punish them (v.7), and they use their power to exploit the weak (vv.5-6 and v.21). God's people feel that it is wrong for anyone to do that, and it is hideous for members of his own people to exult, i.e. to be jubilant over this, their apparent triumph. The right response is to pray to the judge of the earth.

Rise up, O judge of the earth. The psalmist has committed the work of vengeance to God, but will still pray that God fulfils his office and will render punishment to the proud. This call is one that any believer can make in any situation: <<Whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, 'Arise, O Lord, let your enemies be scattered, and your foes flee before you''>> (Numbers 10:35)

O Lord, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked exult? This adds a note of urgency to the psalmist's prayer. With a combination of boldness and humility he asked God to account for the time until this righteous vengeance would be accomplished. Like the souls under the altar, they cry out how long? As did David: <<How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?>> (Psalm 13:2).

Charles Spurgeon commented, “Many a time has this bitter complaint been heard in the dungeons of the Inquisition, at the whipping-posts of slavery, and in the prisons of oppression. In due time God will publish his reply, but the full end is not yet.”

Psalm 94:4-7 - They Are Arrogant Oppressors.

The next section lists the activities of these evildoers: they pour out their arrogant words and boast (the quoted words of v.7 provide a sample of their speech), they crush God’s people, and they kill the helpless such as the widow, sojourner, and fatherless, in direct defiance of God’s attitude; refer to Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:29, 24:17-19 and 27:19.

- 4 They pour out their arrogant words;
all the evildoers boast.
- 5 They crush your people, O Lord,
and afflict your heritage.
- 6 They kill the widow and the stranger,
they murder the orphan,
- 7 and they say, ‘The Lord does not see;
the God of Jacob does not perceive.’

Psalm 94:4-7

They pour out their arrogant words; all the evildoers boast. The first thing noted about the wicked is their words. They speak defiant, insolent things and they boast in themselves. Conversely, a mark of the righteous is their humble, gracious speech. Spurgeon again commented, “Words often wound more than swords, they are as hard to the heart as stones to the flesh; and these are poured forth by the ungodly in redundancy.”

They crush your people, O Lord, and afflict your heritage. The next thing noted about the wicked are their actions against God’s people, those who are his heritage. They destroy them and afflict them. Conversely, a mark of the righteous is their love for God’s people.

They kill the widow and the stranger, they murder the orphan. The third thing noted about the wicked is their attack against the weak and disadvantaged, extending even to murder. Conversely, a mark of the righteous is their care for the weak and disadvantaged. Spurgeon noted, “Must not such inhuman conduct as this provoke the Lord? Shall the tears of widows, the groans of strangers, and the blood of orphans be poured forth in vain? As surely as there is a God in heaven, he will

visit those who perpetrate such crimes; though he bear long with them, he will yet take vengeance, and that speedily.”

The Lord does not see; the God of Jacob does not perceive. The fourth thing about the wicked is their ignorance and arrogance against God. They deny that he exists in the sense that he is revealed in the Bible. This ignorance of God leads to a deluded arrogance against him. This denial that God takes notice of such misdeeds is the height of arrogance and folly, flowing from an unbelieving heart; refer to Psalms 10:11, 59:7, 64:5, and 73:11, Isaiah 29:15, Ezekiel 8:12, and 9:9.

Psalm 94:8-11 - The Lord Knows the Plans of All Mankind.

This section is the reply to v.7: the God who planted the ear, who formed the eye, who disciplines the nations, and who teaches man knowledge, is himself fully aware of everything that goes on, even the thoughts of man. Although these words speak directly to those who arrogantly defy God, they are not the only ones to receive this wisdom: the faithful sing the song and remember it, and do not lose heart.

⁸ Understand, O dullest of the people;

fools, when will you be wise?

⁹ He who planted the ear, does he not hear?

He who formed the eye, does he not see?

Psalm 94:8-9

Understand, O dullest of the people; fools, when will you be wise? The psalmist attempted what some think is a useless mission - to help the senseless and fools with instruction and understanding: <<*Do you thus repay the Lord, O foolish and senseless people? Is not he your father, who created you, who made you and established you?*>> (Deuteronomy 32:6). He specifically spoke to those mentioned in the previous verse, who believed God did not see or understand their wickedness. To **understand** or to **be wise** means to grasp the fundamental truths about God, man, and the covenant.

As in the Wisdom Literature generally, the terms **dullest** (Hebrew *bo'ar*, related to *ba'ar*, i.e. stupid as in Psalm 92:6 and Proverbs 12:1) and **fools** refer to people who resist the offer of grace found in God's covenant. Observe that these are members **of the people**, i.e. of Israel.

He who planted the ear, does he not hear? The logic is simple and solid. The God who created the **ear** can **hear**, and the God who created the **eye** can **see**: <<*The hearing ear and the seeing eye – the Lord has made them both*>> (Proverbs

20:12). The God of all wisdom and knowledge will hold men and women to account for their life.

¹⁰ He who disciplines the nations,
he who teaches knowledge to humankind,
does he not chastise?

¹¹ The Lord knows our thoughts,
that they are but an empty breath.

Psalm 94:10-11

The Lord knows our thoughts. God's wisdom is so great that He even knows the thoughts of men and women. This great God must be appropriately feared, respected, and obeyed. This was important for the senseless and fools to hear and maybe even understand. In 1 Corinthians 3:20, Paul adapts the Greek Septuagint of this verse to remind his readers not to set human wisdom against God's wisdom. And in Romans 1:21 he speaks of the futility of man's intellect against God.

Breath commonly conveys 'futility' which is the LXX rendering, for example: <<*Those of low estate are but a breath, those of high estate are a delusion; in the balances they go up; they are together lighter than a breath*>> (Psalm 62:9).

Psalm 94:12-15 - The Lord Cares for the Righteous.

This section explains how the faithful, who receive instruction from God's word and live by it, i.e. the one <<*whom you discipline, O Lord, and whom you teach out of your law*>> are blessed. They can be sure that punishment (a pit, v.13) will surely overtake the wicked, while the Lord will not forsake his people (v.14) but will bring them justice (v.15).

¹² Happy are those whom you discipline, O Lord,
and whom you teach out of your law,

¹³ giving them respite from days of trouble,
until a pit is dug for the wicked.

¹⁴ For the Lord will not forsake his people;
he will not abandon his heritage;

¹⁵ for justice will return to the righteous,
and all the upright in heart will follow it.

Psalm 94:12-15

Happy are those whom you discipline, O Lord. Perhaps the senseless and fools will never listen to God, but his people must. He will instruct and teach them from his Word, i.e. out of your law. Happy is more traditionally translated as **blessed**.

Giving them respite from days of trouble. This is a wonderful promise to those who receive the teaching from God's Word. They have rest when the inevitable days of trouble come. This rest is theirs until the pit is dug for the wicked, until God sets all things right in his judgement. Spurgeon noted, "Remember the martyr-age, and the days of the Covenanters, who were hunted upon the mountains like the partridge. You must not wonder if the easy places of the earth are not yours, and if the sentinel's stern duties should fall to your lot. It is so, and so it must be, for God has so ordained it."

For the Lord will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage. It is striking that even though the wicked in this psalm are members of 'the people' (v.8), they are nevertheless distinct from God's people and heritage; this implies that the faithful are God's people in the truest sense, while the faithless among them are not. For God's people as his heritage or inheritance refer to Deuteronomy 4:20, 9:26, and 32:9, and Psalms 28:9, 33:12, 74:2, 78:62, and 78:71.

For justice will return to the righteous. God promises to bring his righteous reign and judgement to all things, bringing satisfaction to the upright in heart.

Psalm 94:16-23 - The Lord Will Rise Up on Behalf of His Beloved.

The song finishes with confidence: the Lord will keep his faithful ones firm in their faith (v.18), will protect them (v.22), and will bring the unfaithful into the judgement they deserve (v.23).

- 16 Who rises up for me against the wicked?
Who stands up for me against evildoers?
- 17 If the Lord had not been my help,
my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence.
- 18 When I thought, 'My foot is slipping',
your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up.
- 19 When the cares of my heart are many,
your consolations cheer my soul.

Psalm 94:16-19

Who rises up for me against the wicked? The previous lines of Psalm 94 expressed satisfaction in God's ultimate righteous judgement: <<*I will rise up against them, says the Lord of hosts, and will cut off from Babylon name and remnant, offspring and posterity, says the Lord*>> (Isaiah 14:22). Now the psalmist considered that this hoped-for day was not yet. He understood and expressed his own limitations in dealing with evildoers and the wicked. The speaker is the person singing (the same as 'my,' 'I,' and 'me' referred to in vv.17-19 and v.22); the answer is, 'God does.'

If the Lord had not been my help. His rhetorical question was answered; the Lord had been and would be his help against the wicked. Spurgeon again commented, "If we could find friends elsewhere, it may be our God would not be so dear to us; but when, after calling upon heaven and earth to help, we meet with no succour but such as comes from the eternal arm, we are led to prize our God, and rest upon him with undivided trust."

Your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up. God's mercy would sustain him in the difficult day, even when it seemed that his foot slipped he would not fall.

The specific cares are those expressed in the psalm, e.g. v.3. The consolations are the assurances that God knows (vv.9-11), that he has shown his support already (vv.17-18), and that he will surely judge (v.23).

20 Can wicked rulers be allied with you,

those who contrive mischief by statute?

21 They band together against the life of the righteous,

and condemn the innocent to death.

Psalm 94:20-21

Wicked rulers. The ungodly here have power, and they use it to contrive mischief or frame injustice and to condemn the innocent to death, which God hates: <<*Keep far from a false charge, and do not kill the innocent or those in the right, for I will not acquit the guilty*>> (Exodus 23:7). This verse denies that such rulers could possibly be allied with God, under his favour.

They band together against the life of the righteous, and condemn the innocent to death. This kind of wickedness was described previously in vv.4-6, condemning innocent blood. The apostle described the same wicked heart: <<*Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters, that the world hates you*>> (1 John 3:13).

22 But the Lord has become my stronghold,
and my God the rock of my refuge.

23 He will repay them for their iniquity
and wipe them out for their wickedness;
the Lord our God will wipe them out.

Psalm 94:22-23

But the Lord has become my stronghold, and my God the rock of my refuge. Although the wicked who were set against the psalmist were in high places, he had an even greater defence. God himself was the rock of my refuge: <<*The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble*>> (Psalm 9:9), and: <<*Blessed be the Lord, my rock, who trains my hands for war, and my fingers for battle; my rock and my fortress, my stronghold and my deliverer, my shield, in whom I take refuge, who subdues the peoples under me*>> (Psalm 144:2).

He will repay them for their iniquity. It is common to expect the iniquity of the unfaithful to recoil upon their own heads: <<*They make a pit, digging it out, and fall into the hole that they have made*>> (Psalm 7:15), <<*They set a net for my steps; my soul was bowed down. They dug a pit in my path, but they have fallen into it themselves*>> (Psalm 57:6), and: <<*Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone will come back on the one who starts it rolling*>> (Proverbs 26:27).