

Psalm 94: A Prayer Out of Oppression

Psalm 94 is located in a group of psalms called “enthronement psalms” that express strong commitment to YHWH as king. **Psalms 93-100** is a psalm group that emphasizes the theme of YHWH’s kingship, his reign and his rule as the king/judge of the earth. (See 93:1, 94:1, 95:3, 96:10, 97:1, 99:1)

These commissives are utterances in which the speaker commits himself to future patterns of more-than-merely-verbal behavior...The words are used performatively to perform an act of praise and to commit oneself to various attitudes of supreme and exclusive devotion to God. (Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 71-72)

Commissives are basically promises or commitments. They are speech acts that we can use to commit ourselves to ongoing and future action.

1. What impact does reading these “commissives” in enthronement psalms as more than mere statements of fact have on your use of them?

Some of these enthronement psalms with their refrain “The LORD reigns,” end with a call to rejoice “before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth” (98:9, 94:1 and 23; 96:13, 97:3, 99:4). YHWH is a God of truth and justice, a God who abhors evil and oppression, who hates wickedness and violence. Ignoring this fact is the fundamental mistake of the wicked. Psalm 93 celebrates YHWH as king of the world, able to resist all the forces of chaos (93:3-4). This states the premise for the “enthronement psalms.”

However, divine justice does not always seem to operate, and it is the discrepancy between justice and reality that drives the lament of **Psalm 94**. This sequence of psalms shows that genuine faith in YHWH’s reign is not casual or naive but linked by lament with the world as it really is. Contrary to this statement from the ESV Study Bible, “It puzzles scholars why this psalm is placed here, interrupting the sequence of divine kingship psalms,” none of the seven current Psalms commentaries I consulted were “puzzled” about Psalm 94’s highlighting of the “paybacks, avengings, vengeance, vindications” of YHWH as ultimate king and judge of his people and the whole world.

Psalm 94 is a kind of *lament psalm* that is a *prayer of the oppressed*. **Psalm 94** “reflects a setting in which the speaker is among those facing injustice at the hand of civil authorities.” (Bellinger, *Psalms*, 50)

2. Find and note words and phrases in **Psalm 94**, a community and individual lament of the oppressed, that point to this setting and experience of injustice.

In *The Case for the Psalms*, N.T. Wright observes:

The tone of voice throughout Psalm 94 indicates that the joyful claims about coming cosmic judgment issued in the subsequent poems are not to be made casually. The present state, in which the world still awaits final judgment, is painful and puzzling; Psalm 94 looks back, in this respect, to Psalm 73 in particular. God is the creator (94:8-11); he therefore has the responsibility and the capacity to be the judge, and justice will be done at last (94:15, 23). (N.T. Wright, *The Case for the Psalms*, 141)

3. What is the psalmist in **Psalm 94** asking YHWH to do? What question is he asking YHWH? **(94:1-3)** What is the evil these oppressors have inflicted? How do they rationalize their actions? **(94:4-7)** What “wisdom” instruction does the psalmist offer the wicked? **(94:8-11)** Robert Alter translates verse 11, “The LORD knows human designs, that they are mere breath.” (Alter, *Psalms*, 332.)

4. Continuing in the “wisdom” tradition, *what blessing does the psalmist point out/confer on “the righteous,”* those who are open to the LORD’s work in them? **(94:12-15)**

What parts of the psalmists’s personal testimony in 94:17-19 stand out for you and why?

5. **Psalm 94** reveals divine plans and the part the LORD has for himself and for us in his plans. *What clear statements about God stand out for you in Psalm 94?*

What does God think about wicked laws? Psalm 94 demonstrates that God does not ordain governments to do all that they do. “Can wicked rulers be allied with you, those who frame injustice by statute?” **(94:20)** Clearly, no.

6. What is the psalmist doing about the oppression he is seeing and experiencing? What are we to do as we see and experience oppression, especially legalized oppression? What experiences have you had with standing for and with the innocent and the oppressed? What part does prayer play in your experiences with oppression?

“To clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the world.” attributed to Karl Barth.

Ask yourself: How “casual and naive” is my dependence/trust/faith in our Triune God? How often and thoroughly do I acknowledge and lament the injustice in my own life and injustice suffered by others in the Body of Christ and in the world? How does this impact my heart’s capacity for compassion that spurs action?