

Psalm 9

“Praying for Ukraine, the Church & the World”

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5th Sunday before Easter

Several weeks ago, the nation of Ukraine was invaded by Russian soldiers, tanks, fighter planes and other military units on its eastern, northern and southern borders.

Since that time, much of what has taken place in Ukraine has been obscured by the fog of war, but two things are abundantly clear.

First, there has been a great deal of bloodshed - soldiers on both sides of the conflict have died in the thousands, and many Ukrainian civilians have died as well, particularly in the bombing of cities that has taken place by the Russian military.

Second, the war has set off one of the most significant mass migrations of people that has ever taken place in Europe's history, as millions of Ukrainian civilians have fled eastern and central Ukraine to seek safety in the western part of that nation, or to cross the border into neighboring countries.

To be clear from the outset, this war is *unjust* on Russia's part, according to both to the teaching of Scripture and the dictums of Christian theological reflection that has passed down through the ages, from Augustine to this present time.

Whatever Russia's grievances against Ukraine or Europe or the United States, none of those complaints justify before God the decision to invade Ukraine and bring death and suffering to so many innocent men, women and children, all of whom are made in the image of God and thus worthy of dignity, respect and protection.

Therefore, because this war is unjust, it is a violation of the law of God and Russia's military actions should be unequivocally condemned by the Church of Jesus Christ.

This conflict is also, in a sense, personal for our congregation because a son of our church, Doug Shepherd, who grew up as a part of this congregation in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s, has lived for decades in Lviv, Ukraine with his family, where he leads the Mission to the World team there and oversees the work of Church of the Holy Trinity.

We as a congregation have partnered with Doug for decades in his labors for the gospel, supporting him with our treasure and our prayers, and in fact, Doug was in this very sanctuary only six months ago last August, giving us an update on the work of his church and ministry.

Doug's wife, Masha, who grew up in Odessa, Ukraine, has now fled with their children to Krakow, Poland, while Doug has returned to Lviv to lead in the work of receiving Christian refugees from eastern and central Ukraine and supporting the ongoing worship and ministry of Church of the Holy Trinity.

Last Sunday, I was able to participate in a video phone call with Doug, where he spoke for about 40 minutes about his experience over the past several weeks.

Two things stood out to me in that call. One, the horrific nature of the suffering of the people of Ukraine and the church in Ukraine. Because of this war, people are not only dying, people are losing their homes and their livelihoods and their sense of security and safety. They are leaving cities where they have lived for decades without any assurance that they will ever be able to return. They are homeless overnight.

All across Ukraine, lives are being turned upside down. Women and children are dying. Families are losing sons and husbands in battle. It certainly should give us a new perspective on our own difficulties, which certainly pale by comparison.

The second thing that stood out to me in that call is the courage and strength of this son of our church, Doug Shepherd. I am so thankful for his wisdom, for his humility, for his dependence on Christ as he seeks to lead faithfully in this moment in Ukraine. May the Lord bless and protect our friend and his family.

So what is our role in all of this? What should our response be as Christian people?

First and foremost, this terrible situation half a world away requires our prayers. And that it is not a platitude or a cliché. It is the simple truth.

Prayer is the special and unique calling of the church. No one else can fill this role.

Friends, you and I have, through Christ, been given access to the throne room of heaven, to the very presence of God - to the place where all the real action takes place. To be united with Jesus is a position of great privilege and responsibility.

And I cannot tell you how convinced I am of the importance, the centrality, the utter gravity and significance of our prayers - in this situation and in every situation we find ourselves in our lives.

Friends, do not dismiss the power of prayer. Do not discount it. When it comes to the great events of world history, the prayers of the church are more important than military strength or economic power or diplomatic skill. Prayer is how we move history. Prayer is how kingdoms fall. Prayer is how wars end.

An orthodox priest in America recently exhorted his congregation to pray for the church in Ukraine with these words, words that I am convinced are true: *"Prayer is not something that we do merely to placate our own feelings. Prayer is not good vibes or happy thoughts. Prayer electrifies the cosmos in the spiritual realm, and terrifies the demons."*

So how should we pray regarding great, world-shaking events like what is going on today in Ukraine? How should we pray for Ukraine, the church and the world?

This morning, I want to consider that question from the word of God, and specifically from Psalm 9, which gives us a great deal of wisdom to answer the question - how should we pray?

Listen now to Psalm 9. This text is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to follow along there.

Psalm 9

To the choirmaster: according to Muth-labben. A Psalm of David.

*1 I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart;
I will recount all of your wonderful deeds.*

*2 I will be glad and exult in you;
I will sing praise to your name, O Most High.*

*3 When my enemies turn back,
they stumble and perish before your presence.*

*4 For you have maintained my just cause;
you have sat on the throne, giving righteous judgment.*

*5 You have rebuked the nations; you have made the wicked perish;
you have blotted out their name forever and ever.*

6 *The enemy came to an end in everlasting ruins;
their cities you rooted out;
the very memory of them has perished.*

7 *But the Lord sits enthroned forever;
he has established his throne for justice,
8 and he judges the world with righteousness;
he judges the peoples with uprightness.*

9 *The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.*

10 *And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.*

11 *Sing praises to the Lord, who sits enthroned in Zion!
Tell among the peoples his deeds!*

12 *For he who avenges blood is mindful of them;
he does not forget the cry of the afflicted.*

13 *Be gracious to me, O Lord!
See my affliction from those who hate me,
O you who lift me up from the gates of death,*

14 *that I may recount all your praises,
that in the gates of the daughter of Zion
I may rejoice in your salvation.*

15 *The nations have sunk in the pit that they made;
in the net that they hid, their own foot has been caught.*

16 *The Lord has made himself known; he has executed judgment;
the wicked are snared in the work of their own hands. Higgsion. Selah*

17 *The wicked shall return to Sheol,
all the nations that forget God.*

18 *For the needy shall not always be forgotten,
and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.*

19 *Arise, O Lord! Let not man prevail;
let the nations be judged before you!*
20 *Put them in fear, O Lord!*
Let the nations know that they are but men! Selah

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

Every psalm, like every piece of good poetry, makes an argument, and this psalm is no different. Let's take a moment to consider the flow of the argument in Psalm 9.

In verses 1-2, David begins by declaring his intention to praise God by recalling all of the Lord's wonderful deeds, the record of his faithfulness throughout the centuries.

And indeed, this is where praise begins - not only in what we have experienced personally of God's mercy and kindness, but God's record of faithfulness that we can look back on and recount.

David's recounting of God's faithfulness follows in verses 3-12, and he focus on two main ways that God has been faithful.

First, in verses 3-8, David declares that God's faithfulness has been shown in his judgment of the nations.

In verse 4, this whole section is summarized by David's statement to God: "*You have sat on the throne, giving righteous judgment,*" and the same sentiment is repeated in verse 8 as David declares: "*The Lord judges the world with righteousness; he judges the peoples with uprightness.*"

But what does it mean for the Lord to judge the nations? Verses 5-6 speak to this. Here David writes:

*5 You have rebuked the nations; you have made the wicked perish;
you have blotted out their name forever and ever.
6 The enemy came to an end in everlasting ruins;
their cities you rooted out;
the very memory of them has perished.*

For the Lord to judge the nations means that he will hold them to account. He will consider their works and judge them for their violations of his law. And truly, this is exactly what God has done throughout the history of the world. He has entrusted all authority and power to his Son, Jesus Christ.

And Jesus even now rules over the nations, causing them to rise and fall, bringing them in greater conformity with his law. Consider the history of the world. Where today is the great empire of Assyria? Where are the ancient empires of Babylon or Egypt or Greece or Rome or, in more recent centuries, the empire of Spain or the Netherlands or Great Britain? Where is the kingdom of Napoleon, or Hitler, or Stalin?

Again and again, nations rise. They seem impervious, and without rival. But again and again, the Lord Jesus brings them down - he judges them, and they fall.

In verses 9-12, David recalls God's faithfulness in a different way. He remembers that God has always protected the defenseless, that he has always preserved those who put their trust in him.

He writes in verses 9-10:

*9 The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.*

*10 And those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, O Lord, have not forsaken those who seek you.*

This also is how Jesus rules over the nations. He protects and defends those who are oppressed, he lives forever to save those who put their trust in him.

Sometimes this protection takes the form of dramatic rescue — think for example of the stories of Peter and Paul being miraculously freed from imprisonment in the book of Acts by the hand of Jesus, or David himself being delivered out of the hand of Saul.

But there should be no false triumphalism here.

Sometimes the Lord is a stronghold even as those who put their trust in him are killed with apparent impunity - remember Stephen surrendering himself into the hands of Jesus as he was being stoned by his enemies.

And yet the death of Stephen was not wasted, his life was not forgotten - for his death led indeed to the spread of the gospel throughout the Mediterranean world as the Christians were scattered from Jerusalem. And ultimately, of course, Stephen will one day be raised from the dead.

Yes, there are times when the wicked seem to succeed in their plans. But the reign of Jesus is long, and the arc of his rule bends toward justice.

In verses 13-14, we come to the first petition of the psalm, the first request that David makes of the Lord. He says:

*13 Be gracious to me, O Lord!
See my affliction from those who hate me,
O you who lift me up from the gates of death,*

*14 that I may recount all your praises,
that in the gates of the daughter of Zion
I may rejoice in your salvation.*

Here David casts himself into the arms of God. He asks that the Lord would see him, would see his affliction and his unjust suffering.

And indeed, this is the first petition that we should make of the Lord when we come to the situation in Ukraine.

We should pray that the Lord Jesus will see the suffering of his people, the suffering of the oppressed, the suffering of his church. That he will be gracious. That he will defend. That he will lift his people up from the gates of death that they might recount his praises.

Then, in verses 15-18, David reiterates his fundamental conviction - that even though there is much evil in the world, still God *will* judge the nations, still God *will* remember his people.

This is a statement of faith, an act of belief, and indeed, that is what prayer is.

Prayer is the place where our faith finds articulation, where the rubber of our belief meets the road of reality — for in prayer we confront the evil of the world, we look it straight in the face, we and confess our belief that God *is* trustworthy, that God *will* act.

Full of faith, David writes:

*17 The wicked shall return to Sheol,
all the nations that forget God.
18 For the needy shall not always be forgotten,
and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.*

This is what David claims by faith - that though the nations seem to rise in power, full of wickedness and pride - yet he knows that they will be judged.

And though the needy and the poor seem always to be overlooked, to be forsaken, he knows that the Lord will remember them - that their hope in him is not in vain.

Then, in verses 19-20, David offers his second and final petition:

*19 Arise, O Lord! Let not man prevail;
let the nations be judged before you!
20 Put them in fear, O Lord!
Let the nations know that they are but men!*

This, then, is our second petition that we should offer for the world, for Ukraine, for the church.

We pray that our Lord Jesus would rouse himself, that he would rise up and judge the nations (including our own nation of the United States), that he would call the nations to account, that he would execute justice where there is evil, that he would bring down the wicked and the proud and the selfish.

Embedded in this petition is the reality that throughout all human history, the nations and those that rule them have suffered from delusions of grandeur.

There has never been a powerful nation or a powerful ruler in the history of the world that has not been tempted to believe that he is like God, that his power is unrivaled, that he will rule forever, that his kingdom will never come to an end.

But as Christians, we have been given access to the secret of history - that there is only one eternal ruler, there is only one ultimate power, there is only one everlasting kingdom, and because we know that Jesus is the one whom all these things have been given, we are to boldly ask Jesus to arise and put the nations in fear, that he would humble the rulers of this world, that he would confront the kings of the earth with the truth that they are not gods but only mortal men.

So, friends, as we close today, I want to invite you to embrace your calling as believers on behalf our world.

The responsibility to pray, to petition God to rise up and act, to demand justice for the oppressed is a holy calling.

There is literally no one else in the world who can do this work other than those who belong to Jesus.

And make no mistake. Justice and righteousness will not come to Ukraine through the political schemes of men. It will only happen through the deliberate will and action of God.

For the Lord Jesus is the one who sits enthroned forever; the Lord Jesus is the one who has established his throne for justice.

And he invites you and me and all the saints to exercise our holy calling, to speak boldly our intercessions, and to demand that he intervene in the world to protect and defend those oppressed who put their trust in him, and to break the hubris of the nations by judging them and reminding them that they are but men.

And so we say, by faith, on behalf of Ukraine, on behalf of the church, on behalf of the world:

*The needy shall not always be forgotten,
and the hope of the poor shall not perish forever.*

*Arise, O Lord! Let not man prevail;
let the nations be judged before you!*

*Put them in fear, O Lord!
Let the nations know that they are but men!*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.