

Psalm 64

“Rejoice in the Lord, and Take Refuge in Him”

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Pentecost Season

For some years now, we have been preaching through the Psalms consecutively in the summer months, beginning with Psalm 1. Last summer we reached Psalm 63, and today, this first Sunday of June in the year of our Lord 2023, we pick up again in Psalm 64.

As we’ve worked our way through the psalms these past seven years, one of the convictions that has grown even deeper for me is that there is no subset of the psalter that can be rightly termed “messianic” psalms, if by that term we mean that some small number of the psalms in the psalter are about Jesus, but the others are not.

Yes, of course, Psalms like Psalm 2, Psalm 16, Psalm 110, are quoted and used by the Apostles in important ways in the New Testament to unpack and explain the identity and work of the Christ, but still, the reality remains that every single psalm is a psalm about Jesus.

Every single psalm, in that sense, is a messianic psalm.

What I mean by that is that Jesus himself is the primary speaker in the psalms. Every single one.

Jesus is the true author of the Psalms — he is the psalmist *par excellence*, Jesus is the true subject of the Psalms (that is, Jesus is the one whom the Psalms are about), and Jesus is the one who prays the psalms as well.

Jesus prayed the psalms, of course, in his earthly life. As modern day evangelicals, we mostly think of prayer as a sort of informal conversation between us and God.

But for a first century Jew, prayer *was* the psalms.

To pray to God meant, by definition, praying the psalms. When the gospels record, as they often do, that Jesus went off by himself to pray, we can be sure that the practice he was engaging in most fundamentally was praying the psalms to his Father.

Jesus had the psalms memorized during his earthly life. He quotes them more frequently than any other Old Testament book in his teaching, and while he was dying on the cross, at the time of his most intense suffering, Jesus was praying the psalms, as attested by the gospel writers, who specifically record that Jesus quoted from Psalm 22 and Psalm 31 as he died.

And of course, now as lives forever at the right hand of God in his glorified and risen body, Jesus, God's Son, continues to pray the psalms as he intercedes for us.

And when Jesus prays the psalms, he doesn't just pray that small subset that biblical scholars have termed "messianic" psalms.

No, Jesus prays all of the psalms — all one hundred fifty are on his lips — Jesus prays the imprecatory psalms, he prays the psalms of lament, he prays the psalms of praise, he prays the psalms of judgment — all of these are his prayers, and all of these psalms are about him.

And seeing the psalms as the prayers of Jesus are, I believe, the great secret that will allow us to pray the psalms boldly as well.

The psalms, as you read them, contain all kinds of wild and brazen prayers.

The psalmist, for example, constantly pleads with God on the basis of his own righteousness.

The psalmist very frequently confidently petitions God to judge the wicked.

The psalmist often declares his faith and confidence in God's victory in ways that we struggle to affirm ourselves.

But these kind of prayers actually prove that we need Jesus to pray the psalms with us if we are going to pray them at all.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian of the 20th century, puts it this way: *"The psalms that will not cross our lips as prayers, those psalms that make us falter and offend us, actually make us suspect that here someone else is praying — that the one who is here affirming his innocence, who is calling for God's judgment, who has come to such infinite depths of suffering, is none other than Jesus Christ himself. It is he who is praying here, and not only here, but in the whole Psalter...The Psalter is the prayerbook of Jesus Christ in the truest sense of the word. He prayed the Psalter in his earthly life, and now it has become his prayerbook for all time."*

Jesus prays the psalms even now, and it is as we pray the psalms *with* Jesus (NOT on our own), that we learn to pray them at all.

We are, by the Spirit, united to Christ, you see — and so we can pray them psalms too — but not on our own merits, but only in union with Jesus.

As Bonhoeffer goes on to explain: “*Christ is praying the psalms through the mouth of his congregation...The congregation prays the psalms too, and even the individual prays them — but they pray only so far as Christ prays with them.*”

The psalms are the prayers of Jesus.

And because they are the prayers of Jesus, they are our prayers as well, as those who are united to our Risen Christ, our Prophet, King and Priest — who lives forever to intercede for us.

And so, as we move through the psalms this summer, we will be asking this question again and again — what does this psalm teach us about Jesus?

What does this psalm teach us about Jesus’ life, Jesus’ desires, Jesus’ intentions?

And what does it mean to pray this psalm *with* Jesus, as he prays this psalm to his Father?

With that in mind, let’s turn our attention now to Psalm 64, which is printed on the back of your order of worship.

This is God’s holy and inerrant word. It is more precious than gold, even much fine gold. It is sweeter than honey, sweeter even than the drippings of the honeycomb.

Psalm 64

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

*1 Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint;
preserve my life from dread of the enemy.*

2 *Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked,
from the throng of evildoers,
3 who whet their tongues like swords,
who aim bitter words like arrows,
4 shooting from ambush at the blameless,
shooting at him suddenly and without fear.*

5 *They hold fast to their evil purpose;
they talk of laying snares secretly,
thinking, "Who can see them?"*

6 *They search out injustice,
saying, "We have accomplished a diligent search."
For the inward mind and heart of a man are deep.*

7 *But God shoots his arrow at them;
they are wounded suddenly.*

8 *They are brought to ruin, with their own tongues turned against them; all
who see them will wag their heads.*

9 *Then all mankind fears;
they tell what God has brought about
and ponder what he has done.*

10 *Let the righteous one rejoice in the LORD
and take refuge in him!*

Let all the upright in heart exult!

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. Let's pray...

Blessed Lord, who caused all the holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear this portion of your word, and to read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest these words, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior

Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

This psalm, Psalm 64, is, like all the psalms, a prayer of Jesus.

It is a prayer he prayed during his life on earth, and it is a prayer he prays now at his Father's right hand in heaven.

When we pray this psalm now, we pray in union with Him, the one who speaks this psalm on our behalf.

And indeed, it's not difficult to imagine Jesus praying this psalm during his life.

Though Psalm 64 was written originally by David some one thousand years before the birth of Jesus it speaks prophetically of our Lord's experience.

In verses 2-6, the Psalmist entreats the Lord to hide him from the secret plots of the wicked, from the throng of evildoers.

These wicked don't fight in a straightforward way. They don't favor a frontal attack.

Rather, they are devious and secretive. They sharpen their tongues like swords, the Psalmist says — which is a striking image of malice.

The psalmist says that these wicked people aim their bitter words like arrows, and they set traps and seek to ambush the innocent.

They are shameless, they secretly plot against the righteous and innocent and think that no one can see them — in fact, they consider *themselves* righteous even as they seek to kill and destroy.

If you are familiar with the story of the gospels, you will know who these people are.

In Mark 3, Jesus has barely begun his ministry. The first two chapters of Mark have recorded Jesus' initial preaching ministry, several of his healings, his ministry of exorcism, and his practice of eating with tax collectors and sinners.

But already, Jesus has drawn the attention of the leaders of Israel by claiming to possess, in himself, the authority to forgive the sins — an authority which he subsequently verified by healing a paralyzed man and causing him to walk.

Now, at the end of Mark 2 and the beginning of Mark 3, Jesus is beginning to confront the Pharisees about their false Sabbath requirements. He has proclaimed himself, as the Son of Man, the Lord of the Sabbath, and now he demonstrates what this means.

A man with a withered hand enters the synagogue on the Sabbath day as Jesus is teaching. And Jesus asks the Pharisees this question: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good, or to do harm, to save life or to kill?"

When they are silent, Jesus then tells the man to stretch out his hand, and he heals him.

And the story concludes with this striking verse: *"And the Pharisees went out and immediately [that, is on that very same Sabbath day] held counsel with the Herodians against Jesus, how to destroy him."*

Do you see what happens here?

Jesus heals a man on the Sabbath, and the response of the Pharisees is to use the remainder of that Sabbath day to enter into a conspiracy to murder him.

Indeed, it was a good question that Jesus asked, when he said: "Is it lawful on the Sabbath to save life, or to kill?"

The rest of the gospels records the outworking of this conspiracy that is initiated by the Pharisees.

For three years they seek to kill Jesus until finally, in his crucifixion, they succeed.

And with this context in mind, we can see how this psalm speaks of Jesus' own experience.

"Hide me," the Psalmist says, "From the secret plots of the wicked, from the throng of evildoers, who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows..."

But this psalm is not only about asking God to protect us from evil men. It's also about confidently proclaiming God's triumph over evil.

In verses 7-10, there is a dramatic turn. The psalmist moves from complaint to victory, and here the psalmist speaks prophetically about Jesus' destruction of evil in his resurrection and ascension.

*"7 But God shoots his arrow at them;
they are wounded suddenly.*

8 They are brought to ruin, with their own tongues turned against them; all who see them will wag their heads.

*9 Then all mankind fears;
they tell what God has brought about
and ponder what he has done.
10 Let the righteous one rejoice in the LORD
and take refuge in him!
Let all the upright in heart exult!"*

Do you see what's happening here, beloved?

Those who plotted in secret, those who sharpened their tongues like swords, those who ambushed the blameless with arrows are now themselves suddenly defeated and put to shame.

And indeed, this is just what our Lord has accomplished in his resurrection.

On the third day, the Father turned the tables on the wicked by raising his Son from the dead — and brought about the defeat not only of those who murdered his Son, but indeed, the defeat of all evil.

And now, in his ascension, Jesus has indeed become one whom verse 10 speaks of — he is the righteous one who rejoices in the Lord and takes his refuge in him.

First and foremost, this psalm, like all the psalms, is about Jesus. He prayed it during his earthly life when he trusted his Father to deliver him from the schemes of his enemies. He prays it now as he entreats his Father to protect his church on earth.

But we also pray this psalm. We pray it with Jesus, but it is for us as well.

And as we pray, we learn something interesting that this psalm teaches us about fear.

Let me show you what I mean.

In verse 1, the Psalmist entreats the Lord. He says, *“Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint; preserve my life from dread of the enemy.”*

Isn't that interesting? The psalmist here doesn't simply pray for protection from his enemies. No, he asks God to “preserve his life from *dread* of the enemy.”

In other words, the psalmist comes to God honestly, and asks him to protect him from being afraid of those who would seek to destroy him.

He's asking God to preserve him, most primarily, not from death and destruction, but from dread and fear.

And this beloved, is a prayer that we need. So often, we are afraid — and understandably so — for this world is a fearful place.

And fear is something we're meant to bring to God and ask him to preserve us — not only from the thing that is causing us fear, but from the power of fear itself.

We're afraid of sickness and suffering and death. And that's understandable — because those things are horrible — and all of us will experience them.

We're afraid of the plots of wicked men. And this makes sense, because the world is full of people who are evil and violent and malicious.

We're afraid of ourselves, of our own capacity for sin and self-destruction and unwise decisions. And this makes sense as well, for our hearts are mysterious even to ourselves.

But in the midst of all this fear, beloved, your Lord Jesus has given you a prayer to pray.

He invites you to pray these words with him, saying: *“Father, preserve my life from dread of the enemy.”*

Not just preserve my life from evil. But preserve my life from the fear of evil.

It’s fascinating that Jesus himself prayed this words. That’s worth thinking about, I think.

In his incarnation, Jesus exposed himself to all of our frailty and weakness, including a vulnerability to fear.

But one of the strongest impressions that emerges from the gospel narratives is that Jesus is a man who is unafraid.

Jesus healed that man in the synagogue knowing that it would mean the Pharisees would conspire to destroy him. But he did not hesitate.

And later, when Jesus is on trial for his life, what is most striking is his lack of fear in response to the taunts and threats of the leaders of Israel, the Roman soldiers, the Roman governor.

“Do you not know,” Pilate says, as Jesus stands before him in chains, after being flogged and beaten, *“that I have authority to crucify you?”*

And Jesus simply says: *“You would have no authority over me at all if it had not been given you from above.”*

This is a man, beloved, who was not afraid.

This is a man who did not fear because he had learned to rely on his Father for strength, a man who had prayed many times before, and perhaps even in that moment prayed again: *“Father, preserve my life from dread of the enemy.”*

It’s worth remembering that when the Apostle to the Hebrews reflected on the work that Christ came to accomplish, he emphasized that one of the fundamental things that Jesus came to do was to deliver us from enslavement to fear.

He put it his way in the second chapter of his epistle: *“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.”*

Indeed, as the Apostle rightly understands, fear, and particularly fear of death is a kind of slavery.

Fear is a dominant, compulsive force. It drives us to all kinds of destructiveness when we’re under its spell.

But what is offered to us, beloved, through our Lord Jesus Christ, is freedom.

We pray, with Jesus: *Father, preserve my life from dread of the enemy.*

And in Jesus, that prayer is answered.

For by sharing our flesh and blood and going into dark shadow of death itself, Jesus has destroyed the one who held the power of death and he has set us free from the slavery of fear.

And instead of fear, Jesus offers us joy. He invites us to enter in to what he has won, what has he accomplished.

“Let the righteous one rejoice in the LORD,” Jesus says, *“and take refuge in him!”*

Jesus says those words to you, beloved. And they’re an invitation, a real invitation for you to embrace.

For it is as we take refuge in the death and resurrection of our Lord that we will know what it means for our lives to be preserved from fear, preserved from the dread of the enemy, preserved even from the dread of death itself.

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