

A Selection of Wisdom Psalms: 10, 112, 139

Psalms 10 and 112

1. The Psalms are considered wisdom literature, which means they address practical questions such as “how should I live?” and “how can I be happy?”, as well as more existential questions like “why do the wicked flourish?” Taken together, the depiction in the Psalms of the wicked and the righteous gives the outline of the way God wants us to live. For instance, it says of the righteous,¹

- “The **mouths of the righteous utter wisdom**, and their **tongues speak justice**” (37:30)
- “for justice will return to the righteous, and all **the upright in heart will follow it.**” (94:15)
- “The righteous **rejoice in the Lord** and **take refuge in him**. Let all the upright in heart **glory.**” (64:10; also 68:3)
- “Surely the righteous shall **give thanks to your name**; the upright shall **live in your presence.**” (140:13)
- [*And here it gets a little dark*] “The righteous will **rejoice when they see vengeance** done; they will **bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked**” (58:10; also 52:6)

In contrast, Psalms says of the wicked:

- “...for look, the wicked **bend the bow**, they have fitted their arrow to the string, **to shoot in the dark at the upright** in heart.” (11:2; also 12:8; 37:12, 14; 37:32; 119:95, 110)
- “The wicked **go astray** from the womb; they err from their birth, **speaking lies.**” (58:3)
- “Such are the wicked, always at ease, they **increase in riches**” (73:12)
- “The wicked borrow, and **do not pay back**, but the righteous are generous and keep giving” (37:21)

Read Psalms 10 and 112. What do these add to this picture above? Are the righteous distinguished by their deeds, their beliefs, or their allegiance? In the Psalms are the righteous wholly without fault (Ps 51)?

2. What do you make of the conflict between the wicked and the righteous (see above)? Knowing as we do that we must love our enemies, do we blind ourselves to the real conflict occurring between those who seek after God and those who don't? Would you characterize Jesus' attitude toward the Pharisees as serene detachment or conflict?
3. Psalm 10:7 is quoted in Romans 3:14, along with several other references to the Psalms. Who is being described in Romans 3:10-18, and why?
4. Although “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), the NT does not drop the categories of righteous and wicked. As in the Psalms, these are groups and their fates are distinguished by their actions [cf. the Sheep and Goats (Mt 25); the parable of the net (Mt 13:47-50); 1 Peter 3:12; Rom 2:13]. What's new is that “now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom 3:21-22), a righteousness attested to by good deeds (Jas 2:14-26). Does our gospel alter the profiles of the righteous and the wicked in Psalms?

¹ The Proverbs add some interesting attributes: The righteous “**care for the needs of their animals**” (12:10); “**choose their friends carefully**”, “are as **bold as a lion**” (28:1), “**shout for joy** and are glad” (29:6), and “though the righteous fall seven times, **they rise again**” (24:16).

Psalm 139

5. What is the tone of the first three stanzas? Are they, by themselves, a confession or a hymn of praise?
6. Why might the psalmist want to flee from God (7-12)?
7. What does the “for” at the start of v. 13 indicate? How does 11-12 follow from 13?
8. The Psalms are written in the context of the covenant, which is of the form of a vassal-suzerain treaty, a treaty between a lesser king and a greater. In such a treaty, the enemies of your suzerain must be your enemies as well. How might this influence our reading of 19-22?
9. In Ps 139:21-22, the psalmist tells God that he hates God’s enemies with a “perfect hatred.” It is tempting to see this as OT theology, but like Jesus’ charge to love enemies (Mt 5:43-48), Lev 19:18, 34, says to love one’s neighbor one’s self, and Prov. 25:21-22 specifically tells the reader to help their enemies (see also Ps 7:4-).² Given the apparent inconsistency of 19-21 with Jesus’ injunction to love our enemies, which of the following seems like the best way to read 19-22?
 - a. Recognize that what David *really* means is, “I will hate what you hate”—and maybe that’s not people, but injustice and sin.
 - b. Recognize that the psalmists sometimes expressed what they felt, even when it wasn’t where a godly person should end up. Reading imprecatory psalms can help us work through these feelings.³

Do you think, then, it is healthy for the community to corporately read aloud the whole Psalm, putting in our mouths “I hate them with a perfect hatred”? Or should we just read vv. 1-18, 23-24?⁴

10. Do you resonate with the pursuit of God, or of fleeing from God? How does this psalm speak to you?
11. This Psalm has been used by Christians in speaking out against abortion (139:13). The very next verse, and the psalm as a whole, has also been used by the LGBT Christian community as an affirmation of God's knowledge and love of who we find ourselves to be.⁵ Is either of these a proper use of the text?

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Fun quote: Much as Psalm 139:17 refers to counting God’s “weighty” thoughts, Johannes Kepler described science as “thinking God’s thoughts after him.”

Fun fact: Cyril of Alexandria (316-86), in his Lenten lectures to those preparing for baptism, likened the candles lit during the Easter eve vigil to Psalm 139:12, “even darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day”. The catechumens were the *photizomenoi*, “those to be enlightened.” (Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 521)

² This is not to say the wicked don’t face God’s wrath: Mt 7:23; 25:41; 21:40-44; 22:7; Lk 19:27. We were all previously God’s enemies (Rom 5:10). At the same time, God loves the world enough to send his Son (Jn 3:16).

³ “In fact, meditation upon and application of these psalms could be therapeutic to those who have suffered traumatic hurt (such as child abuse)” (G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*, IVP, 1991, 185).

⁴ Calvin reads this much the same as 2 Cor 6:14-18: “David’s example should teach us to rise with a lofty and bold spirit above all regard to the enmity of the wicked, when the question concerns the honor of God, and rather to renounce all earthly friendships than falsely pander with flattery to the favor of those who do everything to draw down upon themselves the divine displeasure.”

⁵ *Christian Century*, May 16, 2012, pp. 15-16.