

Where is God When Nations Rage?

Reflections on Psalm 2

Introduction

If we believe that God is good and powerful, then we will likely wrestle at times with evil in the world. Philosophers and theologians often refer to this topic as “the problem of evil.” How do we reconcile what we know of God with what we see and experience in the world?

With the scenes and stories that we are seeing and hearing out of Ukraine with the Russian invasion, with fathers sending their wife and children to safety as they prepare to defend their homeland, with the Ukrainian government distributing firearms to its male and female citizens alike, and with news of a Russian artillery shell striking the National Children’s Specialized Hospital in Kyiv, we are wrestling from a distance, but we are wrestling, nonetheless, with the question, “Where is God in times like these? Where is God when nations rage?”

We are not the first generation to wrestle with such questions and, if Christ tarries in His return, we will likely not be the last generation. Fortunately, because we are not the first to wrestle, we are afforded help from those who have gone before us. And, while it is impossible to give an exhaustive answer to every question that is related to the eternal plan of God for humanity, that does not mean that we cannot provide a truthful answer based upon what God has, in His mercy, revealed to us. So, to the end of answering hard questions about God in the midst of difficult times, we turn our attention to His Word, to allow Him to speak for Himself...

Psalm 2

- ¹ Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
- ² The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the LORD and against his anointed, saying,
- ³ “Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”
- ⁴ The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.
- ⁵ He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
- ⁶ “I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.”
- ⁷ I will proclaim the LORD’S decree:
He said to me, “You are my son;
today I have become your father.
- ⁸ Ask me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
- ⁹ You will break them with a rod of iron;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”
- ¹⁰ Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
- ¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
- ¹² Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
- Blessed are all who take refuge in him.
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Exposition

King David was God's chosen king over the people of Israel. Psalm 2, which we just read, was written by King David (Acts 4:25-26) as he contemplated the plots and schemes that his enemies were planning against him and the rest of God's people. As such, the psalm gives us guidance regarding how we ought to see and understand unrest in our world, especially in light of God's plan.

I. The Vain Plot of the Nations (Vv. 1-3)

Our psalm begins with David questioning the purpose behind the plots and schemes of the nations. He writes, "Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?" To be sure, this question is not rooted in ignorance, but disbelief. Why would the nations rebel against God? Some translations describe the nations as "raging." The image in this passage is one of a military numbering its troops, preparing for battle. As the troops come together, they are growling with anger to throw off God and His will in the world. At the hearts of the complaint of these nations is the desire to break and throw off what they perceive to be the "shackles of the LORD." They want to rule instead of being ruled. Their plan is not to obey God but to be God. And they will destroy whatever and kill whoever gets in their way.

When we look at verses 1-3, it is not difficult to see the parallels between what these verses describe and the way that many nations and their leaders speak and behave in our world today. As James 4:1-2 puts it, "What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight." To be sure, James is speaking of our interpersonal conflict, but the principle is no less true of nations and their rulers.

In the case of the current international crisis between Ukraine and Russia, in the most basic sense, the conflict stems from the unrighteous desires of one nation, which led them to invade the land and kill the people of another nation. In this sense, all conflict and sinful action are nurtured in a context of sinful desire. And, by definition, sinful desire looks at God's will for a person or a people and says, "Let us throw off these chains and shackles. Why should God be allowed to tell us what to do?"

Thus, the pride of the nations and their people leads them to plot in vain against the LORD. And every nation and leader is susceptible to such pride. Pride refuses to acknowledge God as King over all. Pride rejects God's will in favor of our own will. Pride believes that we know better than God. Thus, pride leads us to throw off God's will in pursuit of our own, even if that means going to war over it.

If we understand the relationship between our prideful desires and our violent actions, as James 4 teaches us, then it won't be hard for us to see how nations might rage against one another and against God. What happens between nations is simply the devastating results of what happens when the sins of individuals are compounded by their access to power and influence on a societal scale. If it doesn't surprise us when two adults fight and attempt to kill one another over an issue because of their pride, then it shouldn't surprise us when nations that are led by sinful and proud people attack other nations. As the Preacher in Ecclesiastes would put it, "There is nothing new under the sun."

T. S. – Thus far, we have considered the actions of nations that rage against one another, but what about God? How is God reacting to such raging and plotting against His will?

II. The Steadfast Plan of the LORD (Vv. 4-9)

We are blessed to have this glimpse of God. We do not have to speculate regarding what God is thinking or doing when the nations rage and plot in vain. God has revealed to us what He is up to in such moments. So, what is He doing?

Verses 4-9 describe the LORD as “the One enthroned” who laughs and scoffs at the vain plans of raging nations. Now, when you hear that the LORD is laughing, you must not interpret such laughter as indifference or amusement. Verses 4-9 are not describing the LORD as One who is in heaven, apathetic to the pain and suffering in our world. When you see the LORD laugh here, you need to picture something like the greatest, most powerful, most generous king that the world has ever known receiving news that a band of a few peasants have camped outside the gates of the king’s country, and they have declared their intention to overthrow him. Upon hear this news, the greatest, most powerful, most generous king that the world has ever known does not jump up, frantically running to and fro within his royal chamber, asking his advisors, “What are we going to do?” No, this king sits on his throne. He does not wring his hands. He does not worry. If he asks any questions at all, he asks, “Are they serious? Are they really challenging me? Don’t they know who I am? Don’t they know what I am capable of?” He laughs not because He finds humor in their plans. He does not laugh as someone who is pleased. He laughs as one who is mocking their vain plans. He laughs as one who knows his plan cannot be frustrated.

The vision of verses 4-9 is of a God who though never indifferent or apathetic toward evil in the world is also never threatened, worried, or unsettled by it either. While all the earth might be trembling in fear, the God of verses 4-9 never trembles in fear. While the kings of the earth must speak in potentialities about what they might do or what they would like to do, the King of Heaven speaks with certainty, declaring what will come to pass.

Specifically, in verses 4-9, what the LORD claims will come to pass is the establishment of His King. While the raging nations vie for an opportunity to rule the world, the LORD of Psalm 2 guarantees that His King will rule over all the world. This King will receive the nations as His inheritance, meaning that all nations will eventually bow the knee to Him. This King will bring justice upon those who do evil, ruling with a rod of iron.

While the nations rage, God is working out His purpose to have His King rule and reign forever. Even when we are not fully aware of where He is and what He is doing, we can be sure, because of His Word, that God is still enthroned in heaven, working out His purposes in the world, doing His good pleasure (Psalm 115:3). Yet, we ask, “Who is this King? Who is the King that the LORD has appointed to rule and reign over the world? Who is Psalm 2 talking about?”

A gentile physician named Luke records the answer to this question in Acts 4:24-28:

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. ²⁴ When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. “Sovereign Lord,” they said, “you made the heavens and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. ²⁵ You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David:

“Why do the nations rage
and the peoples plot in vain?
²⁶ The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord
and against his anointed one.’

²⁷ Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. ²⁸ They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

So, according to the apostles, the Anointed One of Psalm 2 was not David, but Jesus. The Holy Servant who would receive the nations as an inheritance, who would rule over all the earth, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The One who lived a perfect life of obedience, who died a sinner’s death, who was buried, and who rose again three days later, He is the King who would fulfill the promises of Psalm 2.

Furthermore, Jesus’ own life and death help us to see that our perception about God’s activity in an evil world must be informed by God’s power and plan in the world. Notice how in Acts 4:27, the apostles pray to God and say that while these evil people truly conspired against Jesus, and were sinful for doing so, it was not as if God was powerless or as if His plan had failed. Notice what Acts 4:28 say, “They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.” Thus, if we only allowed our earthly, limited experiences to inform our understanding of what God is up to in the world at any given moment, then we will fail to understand the full picture, just as so many did with Jesus’ life and death. Just think of Peter’s reaction to Jesus’ announcement that the Christ would be put to death. Peter responded from an earthly, uninformed perspective, and Jesus accused him of aligning himself with Satan. Yet, in the life and death of Jesus, God was up to far more than the people could imagine in the moment. And the same is true in our day and age, when we view this world from only one perspective.

The proper Christian response to unrest and tragedy and pain and evil in this world is lament and tears and wonder and prayer to God, asking for a true perspective. But we ought never attempt to discredit God’s justice or condemn Him in order to justify how we are feeling or thinking about issues in our lives and in this world (Job 41:8). When we question the justice of God or seek to condemn Him to justify our own perspective, we are guilty of “speaking of things of which we do not know, uttering things far above us” (Job 42:2).

But understandably, some of you are saying to yourself right now, “Yea, but, how can Psalm 2 be about Jesus? I understand that Acts 4 claims that Psalm 2 is about Jesus, but the world is still so broken and full of evil. How can you say that Jesus is King and there still be so much pain and suffering in this world?”

These are good questions, and I’m glad you are asking them, because others have asked before you. In fact, people during the first century were asking these types of questions. For instance, Christians in the first century were puzzled, at first, regarding how they were to believe that Jesus had conquered death while their loved ones died. The apostle Paul addressed these questions in passages like 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4-5.

And while each of these passages are worthy of their own deep studies, for now, I simply want to present how these passages help us answer these questions about what appears to be a delay in God's justice. Simply put, 1 Corinthians 15 and 1 Thessalonians 4-5 teach us that there is an order to how God is making all things new. The new creation begins with Jesus' own resurrection. He is the firstfruits. Jesus' resurrection is what makes our resurrection possible. Those who have placed their trust in Jesus are already, in one sense, participating in and enjoying the new creation (2 Cor. 5:17).

However, while we have already, in one sense, started enjoying the new creation, we have also not yet fully entered it because we are waiting for the resurrection of our physical bodies. We call this tension "living in the already/not yet." And this is true of Jesus' own reign as King over the world. There is a very real and true sense in which Jesus is already reigning over the world as King. Jesus is, in a very real sense, already victorious over the pain, suffering, death, and evil in this world. Yet, in another sense, the fullness of His victory remains to be seen and experienced, which is the point in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in turn: **Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.** ²⁴ Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ **For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.** ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For he "has put everything under his feet." Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. ²⁸ When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

In other words, Jesus is reigning, and will continue to reign until all his enemies are subjected to Him. The fact that evil still remains is not because God is indifferent to it or because He cannot address it, but rather, it is because God is dealing with it in a particular way at this particular time until the end comes and He brings about His perfect judgment on all who persist in their rebellion against Him.

But you say, "Why would He wait? Why is it taking so long? Where is this promised return?" Peter answers this question in 2 Peter 3:8-9,

⁸ But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

In other words, instead of lamenting that the Day of the LORD has not come yet, we ought to recognize that it is a revelation of God's patience and kindness toward those who have not yet turned to Him. Thus, for the person who says, "If God was real," or, "If God was good, then He would have already returned to put an end to this mess," what they are failing to see is that God is not slow to act. He is patient, desiring that everyone would come to repentance. The very thing that some people point to as an indication that God is not real or that God is not good is, in fact, an expression of His goodness, because if God was not patient, **we all would have perished.** Yet, God is patient, loving, kind, and slow to anger. But He will not delay forever. Which leads us to our final point from verses 10-12...

III. The Blessed Provision of a Refuge (Vv. 10-12)

While the nations rage and the enemies of God plot against Him, He offers them mercy, if they would pay homage to His Son. In His grace and kindness, God not only warns us, but He gives us an opportunity to change sides. The Day of His matchless justice is coming, and only those who take refuge in Him will be blessed. And the door to His refuge has been opened to all in Christ, that those who turn away from their rebellion might enter by faith in Jesus.

Conclusion

So, to conclude, where is God when nations rage?

He seated in the heavens, working out His purposes, preparing a place for those put their hope in Him, patiently holding out an offer mercy to His enemies until the Day when He appears to put down all rebellion, making all things new, wipe away every tear, heal every wound, when every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is LORD. Will you be ready for that day? Will you take refuge in Jesus while there is still time to do so?

Kiss his son, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.