

PSALM 10

THE PRAYER OF LAMENT—SAFE CHURCH CONTEXT

By Rev. Colin Vander Ploeg. October 9, 2016. Please use by permission only.

Today we examine Psalm 10 from the context of Safe Church Ministry. In the Christian Reformed Church as a denomination, we seek to do the work of the Lord as congregations in ways that are safe for all; ways that make space for a person who has been abused to share their painful story and find understanding and a healing path, a supportive place, and also in ways that have effective and just processes for a person who has offended to take needed steps of confession, repentance and become accountable for their actions.

We do all this in the context of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which assures us that we do not walk this life alone but with Jesus, by His Word and Spirit. The ministry of Safe Church, of abuse prevention, victim support, and dealing properly with allegations of abuse, this is not something that stands apart from the core of the Gospel but flows directly from it. Because Jesus died to pay for our sins, it is to Jesus we must go, not only with our hurts and sufferings but also with our sins.

Safe Church ministry, having a safe church policy & practices, growing in understanding of abuse and its impact and responding rightly, is about being faithful to the Lord of the Church who calls us to be communities of healing and grace that lift up the fallen and call the proud and powerful to humility and love.

However, if we are honest with ourselves, we don't like talking or hearing about abuse. We would so much rather the stories stay hidden. No one wants to face the fall-out of someone's offending becoming public. That's why the church as a whole has, for most of its history, swept such horrible events under the carpet, so to speak, trying to do damage control. We don't want to look at the pain and destruction abuse causes in a person's life and beyond. For some of us it is too painful to even accept as being real.

As a result many a victim of abuse, also within the church context, are left in silence, crying out to God for hope, justice, healing, even just to be heard by the church. They are left with lament in their praying. Now in case you are thinking that we don't ignore the suffering of others, that as a church, we are pretty good at being a place for people to share their painful stories, I ask you to think again.

Psalm 10 is a lament psalm, a crying out to God in the midst of suffering at the hands of a doer of evil deeds. So if this is an open part of who we are as a church, then it stands to reason that we probably would sing this psalm in church at times. So I looked into it a bit. I could not easily find any contemporary Christian worship song that took these words to heart for us to sing. And the few that did put psalm 10 to music, did so with pretty upbeat a light music, not very reflective of the visceral suffering expressed in this psalm.

And I know some of us will be thinking, that's because we should be singing from the Psalter Hymnal instead of newer songs, because the Hymnal has songs for this psalm. So I looked at our Hymnal, and I have never sung PH #10. But maybe it was sung in the past. So I checked the older blue psalter (which often had a few songs for some psalms, but only had one for Psalm 10)... then the older red one ... then the even older blue one ... but did not recognize a single tune setting for Psalm 10, and I grew up singing from the Psalter Hymnal.

In North American church worship today, we are not comfortable singing laments. We want the victorious Christian life of success, happiness, and good things which ... strangely mirrors the materialism and greed of our society. Let's be honest, we do not want to lament publically as a church. Somehow we feel that if we cry out, **Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?** Then somehow we are sinning in doubt or unbelief.

But the pain that the psalmist expresses is part of the Word of the Lord here. God is not put off by our suffering. God is not hesitant to speak in His Word of the crushing experience of being the victim of someone's evil and wicked deeds. So we also must be willing to enter into the painful stories with openness and grace to listen, to respond and to act.

We don't like to lament. We definitely don't like talking about abuse, especially in a church context, where good Christian people are not supposed to do things like that, and especially talking about it in a worship service where we are supposed to be glad for God's love and forgiveness. We might voice the call for the suffering to come to Jesus, but we are hesitant to cry the words of the sufferer as the Psalmist does.

To those among us who have suffered abuse (whether sexual, physical, emotional, mental or spiritual), especially in the context of the church community, we confess that as His Body we have for a long time not made space for your pain nor ministered in ways that made it safe for you to share it. And so, as church, we stand in need of repentance, accountability, and change in the face of the realities of abuse. All congregations need to be working diligently on Safe Church ministry.

But thanks be to God there is hope for all. If you have suffered abuse, know this: Jesus has not forgotten you, even if we have failed in following Him faithfully in this. God's Word here testifies to the fact that God has not turned a blind eye or a deaf ear. He does know your pain and is calling us as church to self-examination and accountability in the presence of your pain.

Now even as we work to change things, through the work of a local Safe Church Team for example, we must be honest in that we find in ourselves resistance to fully engaging what is needed. We resist because we are not used to lamenting. And every time we have a discussion about safe church practices, big or small, every time someone brings up questions about how we do things and how this does or does not protect vulnerable persons, especially children, we feel resistance to dealing with it all. Talking about abuse brings over us a cloud of the pain of those who have been made victims, and almost instinctively, we want to back away.

It is one of the ministries of the church that leads us deeper into suffering, not farther from it and so, let's be honest, we have our own built in resistance, and our own built in avoidance about having to deal with it. Even while might be busy advocating for good practices, it can touch painful memories or realities in our lives, and we feel our inner resistance. We don't like to lament. But this suffering path of lament is not optional.

Listen to this Psalm from the perspective of praying about abuse within the church context. The person abused cries out, **Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?** Where is the answer to this cry? Where is one supposed to go to find the Lord and His loving kindness? Is it not to the people of God, to the Church and her discipleship, her leadership, her

sacraments and preaching? Is it not among the church's fellowship that an answer to this cry is to be found?

So when it is abuse that causes a person to cry out for God who has not come to their immediate rescue or has not yet led them to a pathway of healing, what if such a person (and this may very well be your story here this morning) what if that person comes to the church for help, and the church will not believe them nor even listen to them? Or what if the perpetrator of the abuse is a part of the church, even in the church's leadership, paid or volunteer, and when the victim seeks for an answer to their crying out to God, seeking His justice and healing in that church, what if everyone sides with the person in the position of power and trust, because it is just too hard to believe that such abuse could have happened?

Do you see the crucial importance of the local church being aware, supportive and safe concerning abuse? Listen to the following verses as a description of a perpetrator of abuse: Verse 2, **In his arrogance the wicked man hunts down the weak, who are caught in the schemes he devises. He boasts of the cravings of his heart; he blesses the greedy and reviles the Lord. In his pride the wicked does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God.**

Abuse is not something unintentional. It is something done on purpose. It is not something accidental or the result of the victim's luring someone in to do wrongful acts against them. Abuse is all about the use of power and positions of trust over someone for the purposes of the gratification of one's own cravings of the heart, to use the psalmist's language. A person who abuses others, most often grooms their victims to get them to trust them. They are secretive about what they want to do and often using warnings and threats to the victim of what will happen to them or their family if they tell someone.

This is familiar, verse 7 **His mouth is full of curses and lies and threats; trouble and evil are under his tongue. He lies in wait near the villages; from ambush he murders the innocent, watching in secret for his victims. He lies in wait like a lion in cover; he lies in wait to catch the helpless; he catches the helpless and drags them off in his net.** God's Word here shows us such things are real; they happen.

Secrecy is the power wielded by a person who abuses those they gain power over. And in the church context, as long as the church keeps quiet about abuse, we play a part, we participate in such wicked schemes. We help set the traps. But breaking the silence crumbles the power of sin.

From ambush he murders his victims. One victim of sexual abuse described the effect of the abuse on her life this way, "My abuser killed the person I could have grown up to be." Abuse destroys lives. Verse 10 echoes this, **His victims are crushed, they collapse; they fall under his strength.**

No maybe you're thinking, *"I agree. Abuse is terrible. I am so glad it doesn't happen in our church or among all these good Christian people."* Maybe you're thinking, *"That can't be true in the church, can it? I would be able to know an abuser if I met one."*

But notice the reality of the wicked person in verse 5, **His ways are always prosperous; he is haughty and your laws are far from him; he sneers at all his enemies. He says to himself, "Nothing will shake me; I'll always be happy and never have trouble."** As one of the CRC's abuse prevention bulletin inserts says, *"Most [abuse] occurs within a child's "safe world" of home, school, and approved activities [like church]. It most often involves people that the child knows and trusts."*

Persons who abuse can be anyone. There is no “they often look like this or that.” And because of the ambush of secrecy and the schemes that are driven by the cravings of the heart, when the truth of what has happened starts to come out, the victim seeking help is often not believed, and even accused of doing wrong in saying such things. This is often as painful and devastating to a victim of abuse as the original abuse itself. We don’t believe it, because we might know the person they are talking about and they don’t look like some picture in our mind of what an abuser is supposed to look like.

This is not about being suspicious of everyone around us. It’s not that we are supposed to think the worst of everyone around us and go from there. No, this is about being diligent in understanding the dynamics and impact of abuse, as well as the dynamics of abusing. This is about being diligent in willingly making space for sharing the intense burden of pain through listening and acceptance of the stories of others crying out for God. This is about responding to allegations effectively and justly.

Jesus came to save sinners. He came because God’s judgment stands against us in our sin unless we go to Jesus in repentance. That means that Safe Church ministry is not only for the victim to find justice, healing and renewed life in Jesus, but also for the person who offends, through confession (taking full ownership of their actions), repentance (working to change their ways and attitudes), and being accountable (for their actions and the damage they have caused), so that they too can find forgiveness in the Lord and live in new restored ways that keep them from sinning again.

When you read these verses in this Psalm, do you read any minimizing of the utter pridefulness, the utter evil and wickedness and severe damage and destruction caused by one who perpetrates this evil? No. Yet so often when a situation of abuse is uncovered, the first move of the person accused is to minimize their responsibility, minimize the impact, and minimize the seriousness of the accusations. And church leadership has too often been eager to move in that direction because ... well ... we don’t like the lament filled suffering that is dealing with a situation of abuse.

But there is hope for both the victim, for the abuser, and for the church. And that hope lies with the One who also suffered at the hands of the persons in power, the One who was killed with the help of wicked men, but also the One over whom evil, death nor Hell itself, could not keep hold.

Verse 12, **Arise Lord! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless.** Then verse 13 has the wicked man pretty sure his secrets will be safe ... and then verse 14, **But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand.**

Who took our trouble and grief, our cries of lament in hand? Who took it into His nail scarred hands on the cross? It was Jesus who became helpless, without power and without the Father’s help, so that we, in Him, might find again our strength to stand in the Lord, our restored infinite value to the Father; to find our voice to speak truth in love. Jesus lives and reigns and now holds all judgement in His hands. It is to Him we must all turn.

And so ... verse 14, **The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless. Break the arm [an ancient way to say “break the control”] of the wicked and evil man; call him to account for his wickedness that would not be found out.**

Where does the Lord, who is King for ever and ever (vs 16) carry out the answer to that prayer? Here, in the Body of Christ, where sinners are called to account for their sins, finding in Jesus their forgiveness and the strength to walk the road of accountability (repentance means to turn around 180° and go in a new direction). It is here, in the Body of Christ, where victims of abuse are to be supported in their suffering journey toward healing, relying on the helper of all, the Lord God in Christ. They are not to be ignored, shunned, blamed ... for the Lord Jesus sees their trouble and grief.

Safe Church ministry is well summed up by verse 17 & 18, **You hear, O Lord, the desire of the afflicted; you encourage them, and you listen to their cry, defending the fatherless and the oppressed, in order that man, who is of the earth, may terrify no more.**

We are the hands and feet, the ears and heart of the Lord on earth. We are the Body of Christ, the Church. So Safe Church work is not optional. We must hear the desire of the afflicted, as hard as it is to hear, encouraging and listening to their cry no matter what the fall out is going to be for the church. We must defend the fatherless, those who have suffered the oppression of abuse from the very persons entrusted with their well-being. And we must work to ensure that no one is able to terrify through abuse any more.

As we work at increasing our awareness of abuse, our support for victims, and our practices that protect and hold us accountable, remember that in Christ Jesus, God is with us. The Lord Jesus died to set us free from sin and He surrounds us both in our pain and struggles and in the hard work toward repentance and justice. He is Lord, we are His disciples who follow where He leads.

Let us pray...