

Psalm 10

¹ Why, O LORD, do You stand aloof,
heedless in times of trouble?
² The wicked in his arrogance hounds the lowly—
may they be caught in the schemes they devise!
³ The wicked crows about his unbridled lusts;
the grasping man reviles and scorns the LORD.
⁴ The wicked, arrogant as he is,
in all his scheming [thinks],
“He does not call to account;
God does not care.”
⁵ His ways prosper at all times;
Your judgments are far beyond him;
he snorts at all his foes.
⁶ He thinks, “I shall not be shaken,
through all time never be in trouble.”
⁷ His mouth is full of oaths, deceit, and fraud;
mischief and evil are under his tongue.
⁸ He lurks in outlying places;
from a covert he slays the innocent;
his eyes spy out the hapless.
⁹ He waits in a covert like a lion in his lair;
waits to seize the lowly;
he seizes the lowly as he pulls his net shut;
¹⁰ he stoops, he crouches,
and the hapless fall prey to his might.
¹¹ He thinks, “God is not mindful,
He hides His face, He never looks.”
¹² Rise, O LORD!
Strike at him, O God!
Do not forget the lowly.
¹³ Why should the wicked man scorn God,
thinking You do not call to account?
¹⁴ You do look!
You take note of mischief and vexation!
To requite is in Your power.
To You the hapless can entrust himself;
You have ever been the orphan’s help.
¹⁵ O break the power of the wicked and evil man,
so that when You look for his wickedness
You will find it no more.
¹⁶ The LORD is king for ever and ever;
the nations will perish from His land.
¹⁷ You will listen to the entreaty of the lowly, O LORD,
You will make their hearts firm;
You will incline Your ear
¹⁸ to champion the orphan and the downtrodden,
that men who are of the earth tyrannize no more.

When is doing nothing not doing nothing?

When deciding what we should do, most of us do a quick calculation: how likely are we to succeed? We then weigh the cost of succeeding against the cost of failing and decide whether we should take the action. This common metric misses one important variable: the cost of *not* acting.

In this psalm, the speaker focuses on exactly this. While evil people are harming him, God takes no action to protect him. The end of the psalm includes assurance that God is able and can again take note of the suffering and raise up those of unfortunate circumstances. For the body of this poem, however, God is not doing that. The speaker specifically needs to call God out and plead that God rise up and strike at the evildoers. The consequences are clear in this psalm: while God does nothing, the enemies' ways prosper, and throughout the middle section of this poem, we hear many examples of the evil they do.

"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." This line, while perhaps incorrectly attributed to Edmund Burke, is a modern way of conveying the same sentiment, and this week it seems more poignant than ever. In the psalm, we hold God responsible for God's inaction; will sufferers today hold us similarly responsible? The speaker of the psalm echoes the pleas of Abraham and Moses that God step up and live up to God's own attributes of justice and mercy. Will we arise and defend our values of justice and equity? Neither the speaker in this psalm nor I can explain or justify God's choosing not to act. How about our own choices?