

“What the Nations Need to Know”
Psalm 9 (NRSV)

The annals of history are crammed with the records of **what the nations have achieved**. For example, **political organization has yielded astounding results**.

The **Sumerians**, for instance, who lived more than 5,000 years ago in the area now occupied by modern Iraq, built systems of irrigation that took full advantage of the seasonal flooding of the Tigris and the Euphrates rivers, and they developed patterns of government to regulate the water rights and the canal maintenance.

About the same time, the **Egyptians** mobilized large numbers of people and vast amounts of material to build massive pyramid tombs for their pharaoh-kings. These magnificent monuments are so colossal and so precisely made, yet we still don't know exactly how they were built. The enormous cut stones fit within a fraction of an inch of each other and are laid down level and square despite the fact that they weigh several tons each. They are an incredible achievement, demonstrating what can be done when a nation rallies its resources around one major goal.

And, what about the glories of **Greek** architecture, or **Roman** roads and viaducts, to say nothing about their respective impressive development of democracy and administration? These sturdy and graceful tributes to national endeavour still command attention in this day of airports that sprawl in the suburbs and skyscrapers that stretch tall above our cities.

Modern national achievements, too, have logged an enviable record of achievement. For instance, **India** has made great strides in agricultural and industrial development in the more than sixty years since she gained her independence. Today, India is a call centre for worldwide information and technology. In the late 1950s, **Brazil** built an entirely new capital city, Brasilia -- hacked out of the jungles in the interior -- a city of breath-taking splendour, now a World Heritage Site, and a model for urban planning. **Israel** has transformed large stretches of desert wilderness into fertile, fruit-producing farm land. **China, Japan** and **South Korea** have become world producers and suppliers of almost every kind of thing.

Yet, **all of these achievements** – whether technological or educational, political or cultural – **can be deceptive**. Nations that have both attempted and achieved much can unknowingly lure themselves into thinking they are self-sufficient, that they are laws unto themselves. They may develop the mistaken idea that they generate their own resources, write their own rules, and determine their own destinies.

In spite of the need to acknowledge that, in many parts of the western world, matters of faith are largely not a part of the public discourse, I can say with certainty that **Psalm 9 can be seen as a psalm for a time like ours**. It lays out in no uncertain terms what the nations need to know. Further, this psalm becomes even more intriguing when we realize it is an ancient king who is speaking. A seasoned political leader in Israel lifts his voice to God in prayer and, as he does, gives some of the soundest political advice any leaders in any nation could want to hear. The psalmist urges God to teach the nations to **recognize the ultimate sovereignty of God**; and he draws his prayer to a close with the plea to, **“Let the nations know that they are only human”** (9:20).

In the midst of his own power and prestige, this king of Israel knew **the difference between God and himself**, a mere human being, a crucial lesson for all of us to learn. This humble and godly, yet, wise king knew that political might had severe limitations, limitations any nation and its leaders would do well with which to reckon and to take to heart.

1. **Grateful for God’s provision.**

The king’s impassioned prayer contains **impressive insight into the attitudes which national leaders should cultivate** if they are to avoid the arrogance and insolence that so often mark some leaders’ disposition. Gratitude for God’s provision is the first course in the curriculum that the nations need to take, a curriculum designed to teach them that the leaders and the people they seek to serve are but human beings.

The psalmist demonstrates this as he begins his psalm and prayer with praise, “I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High” (Ps. 9:1-2).

The specific context of the king's gratitude is **deliverance from the pressure that enemy nations had brought to bear on him**. Who, exactly, the king's enemies were, we are unsure. If the king is David, it could have been Saul; or it could have been any one of the 101 outside forces ranged against him, or later, against his son, Solomon, and his kingdom.

Theodore Herzl, widely considered the father-founder of the modern state of Israel, once poignantly observed, "A nation is an historical group of [people] of recognizable cohesion, held together by a common enemy."

Though the exact historical setting of the psalmist's concern is not apparent in the psalm, **the predicament the king faced was certainly agonizing**. "Be gracious to me, O Lord. **See what I have to suffer from those who hate me**; you are the one who lifts me up from **the gates of death ...**" (Ps. 9:13). In fact, the opposition he faced, might also have made him feel that **his own fears** were his worst enemies. The king's great agony and suffering in this matter are indicated in the phrase he uses, showing he felt he was being brought right down to "the gates of death." To be brought back up from such despondence and despair naturally gives him great joy.

The fact that **he prays** at all is a sign of his dependence upon God. Would that more leaders of the nations would take time to pray to Almighty God! And the fact that **his prayer begins with thanksgiving** frames the perspective from which this king looks at all of life. The fact that **he so openly acknowledges that he**, with all his political authority and military power, **could not rescue himself** shows how qualified he is to teach others the way of life.

To live in faith is to give thanks. Not to give thanks is to declare our independence from God and to expose ourselves as unbelievers. The nations and their leaders need to know that they are but human beings, human beings who ought to be grateful to God for his provision.

2. **Obedient to God's commandments.**

Israel's good and wise king not only demonstrates the gratitude that should be the hallmark of all people, but he also stresses an obedience to God's commandments, especially concerning the poor and the afflicted which is another key element in the attitude of those who are truly human.

The nations that have vexed God with their cruelty and oppression have made a great mistake. They have not only been politically indiscreet; they have also **broken international agreements** with their ruthless violation of boundaries; and they have **not been kind or compassionate**, and in so doing, they have sinned against the commandments of God. The psalmist puts it even more dramatically: “The nations have sunk in the pit that they made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught.” Therefore, “The wicked shall depart to Sheol [the Pit of pits, the world of death, the place where are to be found], all the nations that forget God” (Ps. 9:15, 17). Forgetting God means acting as though God does not exist, laying plans as though God is not concerned, disregarding the rights of others as though they were not vitally important to God, which, of course, they are.

Some forty years ago, **Aleksander Solzhenitsyn** successfully reminded the people of Russia that **they had forgotten God**, and he pointed out how, as a result, a lot of other things went wrong in their nation. **People lived a lie. Truth was subverted.** A studied disregard of human rights had crept into the government’s actions. **Forgetting God, the people had lost sight of how important human beings actually are.** Moreover, in forgetting God, the communist leaders had forgotten that the political powers they enjoyed had been given to them to enforce justice in their land, and among the nations; they were not to be used, as they were, as tools of cruel injustice.

Almost nothing vexes God more or rouses his zeal more to judgment than **the flagrant disregard of basic human rights**, especially of those who do not have the political or economic strength to care for themselves: “For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever” (Ps. 9:18). Let the nations know that they are but mortal human beings who are subject to God’s basic commandments.

3. Responsible to God’s judgments.

So, the psalmist cries out, “Rise up, O Lord! Do not let mortals prevail; let the nations be judged before you. Put them in fear, O Lord; let the nations know that they are only human” (Ps. 9:19-20).

The facts are, **God does judge the nations and the leaders of the earth.**

Percy Bysshe Shelley has a wonderful poem about this, called **“Ozymandias.”**

I met a traveler from an antique land
 Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
 Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
 Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
 Which still survive, stamped on those lifeless things,
 The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
 And on the pedestal these words appear:
 "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
 Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
 Nothing besides remains. Round the decay
 Of that colossal wreck boundless and bare
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Who would have thought that **Persia's Empire** would wane, or that **Alexander's Empire**, or the **Roman Empire** would disappear? Or that **Napoleon** would not stride the map of the world forever? Apparently, Shelley was mocking Napoleon, already in exile, in his poem, basing the description of his eventual ruin upon the broken-down statue, still to be seen in the desert sand, of Ozymandias, an ancient pharaoh who once mightily strode his world in the 13th century B.C. So, also, who would have thought that the 1000-year projected reign of **the Third Reich** would cease in only five years? Who would have thought that the 70 year long **Soviet Empire** would break up only a few years after the fall of the Berlin wall? Once again, I say, there is no doubt that God judges and will judge the nations.

For those who pay no attention to the commands of God, **the result is clear: judgment**. The psalmist says lots about this in his psalm, but his approach is different from ours. He looks forward to judgment and rejoices in it ahead of time. He praises God for helping him in his own particular situation, "For you have maintained my just cause; you have sat on the throne giving righteous judgment" (Ps. 9:4). As far as other situations go, things may look bad now, "But the Lord sits enthroned forever; he has established his throne for judgment. He judges the world with righteousness; he judges the people with equity" (Ps. 9:7-8).

To begin with, judgment means that **God will hold people accountable**. **Robert Mugabe** will say that "only God can remove him from power"; but that is exactly what God is doing and will surely do.

For completely different and what we assume are much more honourable reasons, God will also hold **Premier Gordon Campbell** and **Prime Minister Stephen Harper** and the leaders of their loyal oppositions to account as they see how equitably their governments meet the needs of those who have elected them, and the Canadian people, too, will, as usual, decide some day whether they will be re-elected.

There is a restorative aspect to God's judgment. Part of what God does when he judges is to **redress grievances, right wrongs, reward those of steadfast faith and stalwart conduct.** Along the way it may appear that wrong goes unpunished and right does not get administered, but "righteousness and equity" are the style of God's judgment. We can bank on God to do right, though his schedule and timing may not always coincide with ours.

There is also a retributive aspect to God's judgment. Where God is not worshipped as God, where people are not honoured as human beings who possess the dignity of certain inalienable rights and privileges and responsibilities, **retributive judgment will be the result.** It might result in a simple removal from office, or it might include something else. Ultimately, **only God can judge another human being.** Often in biblical pictures of judgment, the punishment fits the crime. When the nations have forgotten God, the psalmist says, "You [God] have rebuked the nations, you have destroyed the wicked; you have blotted out their name forever and ever" (Ps. 19:5). The evil some leaders perpetrate upon others often boomerangs against them: "The nations have sunk in the pit that they have made; in the net that they hid has their own foot been caught. ... The wicked are snared in the work of their own hands" (Ps. 9:15, 16b).

As long as God is God, **judgment is inevitable.** As long as human beings are human beings, they are totally responsible to God for their actions. Let the nations know that they are but comprised of human beings, mere human beings who, whether they like it or not, are ultimately responsible to God. For us to acknowledge that we are but frail and fallible human beings enhances our human dignity. But to try to be more than human always ends up making us less than human. **What the nations, what all of us within the nations, need to know is that God is God and we are his people.**

Service to others, not power, should be our ambition; **concern, care and compassion** for others, not exploitation, should be our way of life.

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