Why Do the Nations Rage

On Psalm 2, the Cosmic Laughter of God, and Cruciform Words

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"Why?"

Earlier in the week, several members of my family, children and grandchildren, gathered at my house. It had already been a difficult day, and I had not been looking to be brought any lower. But they came in heartbroken. There had been a death that week: the kind of death that breaks something generationally, with a lot of weight behind it, a lot of complicated grief, a lot of unanswered questions. And as I sat with them, listening to the depth of their hurt and their lack of understanding, I found myself asking the Lord, *How do we make sense of the senseless? How do we ground ourselves in a reality that is you, in truth, in love, in goodness?*

I went to sleep that night with that question still echoing. And at five minutes to one in the morning, I woke up. One word was in my mind. *Why.* It startled me awake. I lay there in bed and said the word out loud to myself. *Why.* And then I kept going.

> Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision. (Psalm 2:1–4)

I lay there and the *why* of Psalm 2 kept rolling in my mind. Why the rage? Why the plotting? Why the rulers taking counsel together? Why the determination to cast away the cords? And the more I sat with it, the more I felt: This is what I need to talk about on Sunday. So that is what we are going to do.

Read the whole psalm:

> Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, "Let us break Their bonds in pieces and cast away Their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the Lord shall hold them in derision. Then He shall speak to them in His wrath, and distress them in His deep displeasure: "Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion." "I will declare the decree: the Lord has said to Me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.'" Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him. (Psalm 2:1–12)

That is a lot to take in. The first part and the last part are reflections on the people of this world. And I want to show you how the New Testament authors take this exact psalm and turn it just a bit, to give you an amazing perspective on what God intended to do through his Son. The miracle is this: God was going to take the rage and the violence of the nations and turn it into something redemptive. And not just redemptive for the good people of the world, but for the

people who could be considered the absolute *epitome* of these very words. As we will see, these very words were applied to *them*, and somehow God redeemed them.

The Spirit of the Riot

What is this rage? What is this vain thing the nations are plotting? The Hebrew word here carries the sense of a riot, a press of bodies, a crowd taking on a spirit of its own. I was at Dodger Stadium one time when the crowd started pushing and shoving, and all of a sudden a spirit took over that place that no one in it had any control over. I thought, *I am in serious trouble. I am about to be crushed by this press.* That is what Psalm 2 is talking about. The nations raging. The people plotting in vain.

Originally, of course, the psalm was about all the kingdoms surrounding David and Israel, the hostile nations plotting against David's throne. What were they plotting? That they could cast away the cords and break the bonds that God and his Anointed had put on them. They took counsel together, *how do we get out from under?*

And what are the bonds and the cords? The bonds and cords are the foundational reality of how God created all things. God created the heavens and the earth, and there is a reality embedded in his creative act. There is a way to live that produces ultimate human freedom, ultimate human joy and thriving. The Jews called it *shalom*. It was the wholeness that became available when a people lived in accordance with God's directives from the point of creation. When an individual or a tribe or a people or a nation decides to throw off those governing restraints (to live according to their own authority, by self-rule) *that* is the raging the psalmist is talking about. The nations felt the rule of God on them through Israel, and they hated it.

Two Men on the Same Mountain

Consider Balak and Balaam. When Israel was in the wilderness, King Balak hired the prophet Balaam to come and curse them. Balaam climbed up the mountain to bring the curse. And when he looked down, he could not. He saw the orderliness of the tents. He saw how the tribes were arranged. He saw God at the center through the tabernacle. And instead of a curse, blessing came out of his mouth:

"How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel!" (Numbers 24:5).

He went further. He prophesied a star rising out of Jacob and a scepter rising out of Israel (Numbers 24:17). The order of God's people captured him. He could not unsee it.

Balak stood on the same mountain. Balak saw the same orderly camp. And all Balak wanted to do was curse it. How is it that two men can see the same thing and one is drawn into worship while the other is enraged into hostility? That is the question Psalm 2 is also asking. The cords of God's reality, present in the lives of his people, will provoke worship from some and rage from others.

The Cosmic Laughter

"He who sits in the heavens shall laugh." This is not a giggling laugh. It is a mocking laugh, but not a cruel one. It is the laugh of someone who is not intimidated. Have you ever known *that you know that you know* something, and someone has come up to you to tell you something different, and you can see they don't know that they don't know? You don't mock them. You feel something like a gentle amusement on their behalf. *Let me help you. Let me explain.*

That is part of what God is doing here. But there is more. It is almost like a *cosmic joke* God knows in the back of his mind: He is going to take the rage and the plotting and the

scheming of the ungodly, and somehow he is going to use that very rage to bring about his own purposes. *Their rage will lead to the redemption of all humanity and the elimination of all rage.* No wonder he is laughing. "Okay. Come on, then. This is part of my plan, set forth from the beginning, to redeem all of humanity, and somehow I am going to use your own sin and rebellion to bring it about."

"The Lord shall hold them in derision." The works of God are not threatened. Not by any power, any force, any threat.

"Today I Have Begotten You"

Then God speaks:

"'Yet I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion.' 'I will declare the decree: the Lord has said to Me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You.'" (Psalm 2:6–7).

"Today I have begotten you." This is not biological begetting. This is the day the oil was poured over David's head: his coronation day. On that day, David became the heir of God and the authority of God in the world. He became the one all the nations were to reckon with. And this verse, *You are My Son, today I have begotten You*, gets quoted multiple times in the New Testament, and in every case, the New Testament authors locate the moment of begetting somewhere very specific. We will come to that.

First, the inheritance:

"Ask of Me, and I will give You the nations for Your inheritance, and the ends of the earth for Your possession" (Psalm 2:8).

Right now, this is happening. It has been happening since Acts 10, when Cornelius's household, a Gentile centurion in Caesarea, called for Peter, and Peter came. Before Peter went, God gave him a vision: a sheet let down from heaven, full of unclean animals, and a voice

saying, “Rise, Peter; kill and eat.” Peter resisted: “Not so, Lord! I have never eaten anything common or unclean.” The vision came three times; God wanted to make the point. Then there was a knock at the door, emissaries from Cornelius, and Peter went.

Peter could barely get a word out before the Spirit fell. He preached how the God of heaven had anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and the Gentiles in the room *immediately* began to speak in tongues. The Spirit was poured out before they had been baptized in water. Jewish converts had always gone under the water first and received the Spirit after. Even the Samaritans, in Acts 8, had gotten the order right. But here were these Gentiles, doing it all out of order, receiving the Spirit before baptism. And Peter looked around the room and said:

“Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47).

“No, we can find no Scripture against it. Baptize them.” That moment in Cornelius’s house was the start. The nations were now Christ’s inheritance. And it has continued with every one of us in this room, every non-Jew who has called on the name of God through Jesus Christ is part of the inheritance promised in Psalm 2. The last words of Jesus before his ascension press the same point:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

“You Shall Shepherd Them”

Now we come to the line that sounds harshest in Psalm 2:

“You shall break them with a rod of iron; You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s vessel” (Psalm 2:9).

A brief technical note, and don't run away. There is a Hebrew text of the Old Testament called the Masoretic Text. When the Jews were engulfed in the Greek and Roman world, they translated the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, in a translation called the Septuagint. And the Septuagint translators do not render this word as *break*. They render it as *shepherd*. "You shall *shepherd* them with a rod." The Hebrew word for *rod* there can mean either the scepter of a king or the staff of a shepherd. And when this verse gets quoted in the New Testament, the New Testament authors always use the Greek version. They go with *shepherd*.

And the "dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel" sounds brutal, but pull the curtain back. We do not serve a brutal God. *Are you* broken in pieces? *Are you* shattered? Or was it your idolatry, your rebellion against God, that was shattered and broken? What was broken in your life when God spoke?

We have all been broken. The gods of the world will leave you broken: blind, deaf, mute, unable to walk. We become what we worship. If the gods we serve are idols (with eyes that cannot see, ears that cannot hear, mouths that cannot speak, feet that need someone else to carry them) we become like them. We become *malformed* and broken. And then Jesus comes on the scene, and he gives us sight, and gives us hearing, and gives us a mouth that can speak. He is breaking, yes, but he is breaking the *bondage* of the idols we had served.

And the message we now carry back to the nations is *Kiss the Son*:

"Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him" (Psalm 2:12).

Accept his rule. Accept his authority. As Jesus said:

"Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:29).

That is what this world needs. We see the cost of the idolatry of the age every week. People in despair so deep that they cannot find a place to put their hand to climb out of the pit. The gods of this world have blinded their eyes. There is no light in them. That is why they rage against God. *Just as you and I once raged against God.*

Acts 4: The Prayer of the Persecuted

Now look at how the apostles use this psalm. The resurrection of Jesus has led them to a profound conclusion: *if God raised Jesus from the dead, everything has changed*. They have watched him ascend through the clouds: fulfilling Daniel 7, where one like the Son of Man comes up to the Ancient of Days through the clouds and receives a kingdom. They have received the Spirit. They have begun to speak. They have healed a man in the temple, just as Jesus said they would ("greater works than these shall you do, because I go to My Father," John 14:12). And it has created a stir.

> The Sanhedrin arrests them. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, addresses the council:
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> Rulers of the people and elders of Israel: If we this day are judged for a good deed done to a helpless man, by what means he has been made well, let it be known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by Him this man stands here before you whole. (Acts 4:8–10)

The resurrection is the defining moment. The council releases them with one demand: *stop talking about him*. And Peter and John reply:

"Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:19–20).

If you want a mandate for the rest of your days, it is this: receive the word of God into your mind, receive the Spirit of God into your life, so that you *cannot help* speaking the things which you have seen and heard. It is called your *testimony*. The Greek word for *testimony* is *martyr*. God has put words in your mind. He has put his Spirit in your life. He has put words in your mouth. He wants you to testify of him.

Peter and John return to the others, and the gathered church lifts up the very prayer that Psalm 2 was written for:

> Lord, You are God, who made heaven and earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the mouth of Your servant David have said: 'Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord and against His Christ.' For truly against Your holy Servant Jesus, whom You anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done. (Acts 4:24–28)

Look at the interpretation. "Why do the *nations* rage?," Pontius Pilate and the Gentiles. "Why do the *people* plot in vain?": the people of Israel, gathered with the Gentiles. The New Testament authors do not get a xenophobic thing going. *Xenophobia* literally means fear of the *xenos*: the foreigner, the nations. Don't be scared of the nations. Don't be scared of the ungodly. *They are the target of every action we take.* And Israel, in its unfaithfulness, gets lumped right in alongside them.

And here is the cosmic laughter ringing through this prayer: "They were gathered together to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose determined before to be done." *I can hear*

God laughing. "You thought your rage was going to thwart me? Your counsel was the very thing that was going to spread righteousness throughout the earth."

The people of God are not defeated by violence. They are not defeated by death. They are *participating*. When Jesus said, "Take up your cross and follow me," he anticipated that there is a cross for every one of us to bear. Yours is not mine. Mine is not yours. But we all have one. And that cross will lead to the redemption of *somebody*. Somebody's redemption is dependent on the cross *you* are bearing right now.

And then the prayer continues:

"Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word . . " (Acts 4:29).

Grant to Your servants that they may speak Your word. Servants of God, speak the word of God. Be the servants he has called you to be. When he put his Spirit within you, he put a word in you, a gift, a vocation. Something for you to do in this world that would be a redemptive power for the people you have influence over.

Acts 13: "Today I Have Begotten You"

Now jump to Paul preaching in Antioch of Pisidia on his first missionary journey, in Acts 13. He is unpacking the story of Jesus for a synagogue audience. The prophets had spoken about a coming Messiah; the religious leaders in Jerusalem, though they read those prophets every Sabbath, ended up *fulfilling* the prophets by condemning Jesus:

> For those who dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they did not know Him, nor even the voices of the Prophets which are read every Sabbath, have fulfilled them in condemning Him. And though they found no cause for death in Him, they asked Pilate that He should be put to death. Now when they had fulfilled all that was written

> concerning Him, they took Him down from the tree and laid Him in a tomb. But God raised Him from the dead. (Acts 13:27–30)

Hold onto that phrase. *But God.* Every terrible event you live through will have a punctuation mark at the end of it, and the punctuation mark is *but God*. Live into that promise. Whatever has happened in your life, however tragic, *but God* is coming at the end of it. *But God raised Him from the dead.*

And then Paul makes the connection explicit:

> And we declare to you glad tidings, that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: "You are My Son, today I have begotten You." (Acts 13:32–33)

When Jesus came out of the grave, *that was the day*. That was the begetting Psalm 2 prophesied. On that day, God finalized his plan, and Jesus became the heir of all things: king of the universe, not just king of the Jews.

Pilate had put the placard over the cross in three languages: *King of the Jews*. He thought he was being ironic. But he had it wrong. Jesus had refused that smaller title when Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the earth in the wilderness. He had said, in effect, Not today, Satan. You savor the things of this world; I will only savor the things of God. If my Father wants to exalt me, he will exalt me, but I will not bow the knee to you. And so the actual title was given by the Father on resurrection day, not by Pilate in three taunting languages. *King of kings and Lord of lords.* And if the resurrection is true, then everything is possible for goodness and wholeness and soundness. The order of creation can be recovered, because Jesus came out of the grave. Paul says it explicitly:

"But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you" (Romans 8:11).

Do you want to be quickened today? Allow the Spirit of God who created the cosmos to come into you and create some new possibilities. Raise you up. Give you a voice. Let you speak the words that need to be spoken. No more shame. No more wringing of hands. No more apologies for living. We live in a very *woke*, very wise age that has tried itself and failed, and *just because we did it wrong does not mean it will not work*. Just because Israel had not been Israel did not mean God was not going to raise up Jesus and call the twelve, and the hundred and twenty, and the three thousand at Pentecost. Just because some have been unfaithful does not mean God is not going to raise up faithful people who will be the right witnesses.

The Word of God Goes to War

Now we come to Revelation 19: the culmination. The Jesus who was raised up, who caused all that excitement at the empty tomb, gathers everything to himself. And in the middle, between the alpha and the omega of Christ, are the *nations* he has inherited:

> Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. (Revelation 19:11–13)

"His name is called The Word of God." Before we get to the harder imagery, dwell on this for a moment. John, in writing the prologue to his Gospel, was in direct conversation with the philosophers of his day. The Stoics and the Platonists had a category for *logos*: the rational

principle, the logical construct, by which all things in the cosmos are ordered. John takes that category and says, in effect: *the truth of God, the logos, the Word by which all things were established; that is Jesus.*

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God" (John 1:1–2).

Jesus is the grounding principle. The foundation. The whole creation is established by him. Look at Proverbs 8 and 9, where Wisdom is personified. Wisdom has built her house. She has hewn out her seven pillars. She has prepared a feast. And she calls to the simple:

"'Whoever is simple, let him turn in here!' As for him who lacks understanding, she says to him, 'Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed'" (Proverbs 9:4–5).

Wisdom is hospitable. *Come in. Come out of the darkness, simple ones. Come and learn.* Look at how much she has prepared, how much room she has made for the simple to be fed. But just down the street, the foolish woman sits at the door of *her* house, almost a dark cave, calling the same simple ones:

"'Whoever is simple, let him turn in here' . . . 'Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant'" (Proverbs 9:16–17).

Stolen. Secret. Hidden. The things of God are done openly, with hospitality. The things of the foolish woman are done in secret, in a labyrinth: people come in on the hope of finding something to sustain them, and they find themselves locked in a prison.

The battle is over the simple. And the simple need *us* to open our mouths, because every one of us was simple one day. Every one of us was once captivated and enraged and plotting, but God did something for us through the voice of his Son. We owe a debt. We *do not well* if we sit

out here with all the wealth and do not go back to tell the people in the city that are starving to death that there is bread.

So back to Revelation 19. Jesus, the Word of God, rides out, and the armies of heaven ride with him:

> And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. (Revelation 19:14–16)

How do we reconcile *that* with Jesus saying "Love your enemies, do good to those who despitefully use you and persecute you"? Here is how. First, the rod-of-iron line again carries the Septuagint sense: *he shall shepherd them with a rod of iron*. This is not a destructive force. It is a confident, firm, just, righteous ruling. And what is the justice of this King? Isaiah said it:

"A bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench; He will bring forth justice for truth" (Isaiah 42:3).

That is *his* version of justice: binding up bruised reeds, fanning into flame smoking embers. *This is the God we serve.* So when we read that he rules with a rod of iron and treads the winepress of wrath, notice what we are also told: his robe is dipped in blood, but the armies who follow him are *white and clean*. There is a lot of blood, but not on those who follow him. Revelation 7 makes it explicit:

> After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb,

> clothed with white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” . . . These are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. (Revelation 7:9–10, 14)

The blood on the Lamb is his own. And the white robes of the armies who follow him have been made white through the blood of the Lamb. They represent all nations and tribes and tongues and peoples. So when Revelation 2 says to the Church of Thyatira:

> And he who overcomes, and keeps My works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations (‘He shall rule them with a rod of iron; they shall be dashed to pieces like the potter’s vessels’) as I also have received from My Father. (Revelation 2:26–27)

This firm, uncompromising loyalty to Christ and to truth is *how* the idolatry of the age is shattered and broken. *The people are not shattered and broken. The nations are not shattered and broken,* or you and I would have nothing to talk about today. What is shattered and broken is the *idolatry* of our age. The power we have over the nations is not personal power. It is *cruciform* power, the power of Christ taking adversaries and making them family. *While we were yet enemies*, Paul wrote to the Romans, *Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8). The blood of the Lamb. The robe dipped in blood. *While we were enemies.* And if while we were enemies he reconciled us, *how much more*, now that we are his, will he give us everything that pertains to righteousness and life?

The Mount Ararat of Sinners

One example, and then we close. Paul, writing to Timothy, looking back on his own conversion:

> And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry, although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. (1 Timothy 1:12–15)

"A blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man." Paul's violence is the violence of Stephen's stoning in Acts 7. When Stephen stood up and spoke the truth, the men who killed him laid their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul (Acts 7:58), the same Saul who would become Paul the beloved apostle. So when the early church was praying *Why do the nations rage? Why do the people plot in vain? The rulers set themselves*; *they were praying about Paul.* He was the very embodiment of Psalm 2's hostile rulers.

That means the conclusion of the New Testament's reading of Psalm 2 is not in the violent destruction of God's enemies. It is in the *redemption* of his enemies, by crushing the idolatry in their hearts and bringing them out. That is why Paul's prevailing metaphor is that we were dead in our trespasses and sins, but have been made alive in Christ. The old man is dead. The new man is raised up. *This* is how you die. This is how you are crushed and shattered and broken, so that now you get to live in truth, by the founding Word of all creation, and you find blessing and wholeness and peace in that.

"I did it ignorantly in unbelief." *Who didn't?* And the grace of our Lord was *exceedingly abundant*. That word means *overflowing*. If you think you know how much love and grace God has for those captivated by the darkness of this age, *don't underestimate it*. God's work in Paul

was done as a demonstration of how much grace he could possibly bring to the game. *What laughter*.

Think of it as a kind of inverse flood. Paul is the Mount Ararat of sinners. The flood, in his case, is not waters of destruction overtopping the highest mountain. It is *waters of grace* (exceedingly abundant, overflowing) that rise higher than the Ararat of his sin. He was the chief. The flood of grace went higher. And Paul says he was made an example for all of us:

"However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life" (1 Timothy 1:16).

A pattern. If Christ could be patient with Paul, he can be patient with anyone in your life. He can be patient with you.

Cruciform Words

We have a lot of work to do. But it is done with *tears*. Like Jesus on the night he was betrayed, weeping over Jerusalem:

> O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing! (Luke 13:34)

Whatever words come out of our mouths cannot come from a high-and-mighty power position. They have to come the way Jesus exercised his authority, *by dying on the cross*. Our words have to be *cruciform*. They have to be formed by the cross. If we will speak that way, then we will be doing what Psalm 2 promised: We will be the people through whom God laughs in the face of the rage of the nations and turns that rage into the redemption of the very ones who were raging.

Why do the nations rage? *Because God is about to redeem them.* Let your words be the words that, by his Spirit, do the redeeming.