

Plea For Judgment
Psalms 58 & 59
Series: The Psalms [#18]
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August 22, 2010

Introduction

“God, help me. Rescue me from evil people who sharpen their tongues like serpents filled with poison to falsely accuse me. They tear at me like lions to destroy me. They plot and set ambushes to kill me. Do not keep silent, O LORD! Be close to me. Deliver me from them. Save my life! Shatter their teeth! Break their fangs! Judge them quickly before they know what is happening to them! Pour out Your burning indignation on them! Destroy them in Your wrath! O that You would kill the wicked!”¹

Feelings, pleas from the Psalms, from the *imprecatory* Psalms. The term imprecatory refers to calling for judgment or a curse on someone. These Psalms are *pleas with God for judgment*.

There are a number of imprecatory Psalms. Most of them were written by King David. While he was a warrior king, he also had a heart of love and compassion. When God removed His blessing and the right to rule from Saul, Saul tried to kill David, the one God chose to replace him. After Saul was dead and David had taken the throne, he asked “Is there yet anyone left in the house of Saul, that I may show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake?” There was one man, Saul’s grandson named Mephibosheth. He had been injured as a child and was lame. David arranged for him to live at court and had people cultivate land for him so he would have his own income and something to leave his children.² Yes, David had a heart of love and compassion.

But we do not see that heart of compassion in the imprecatory Psalms. And it is safe to say that they are not the favorite Psalms of very many, if any of us. They can bring us uneasy, uncomfortable feelings. They can be easy to skip. *Just turn the page and gon on to the next one!* But, they are part of Scripture.

This morning we are going to look at the two imprecatory Psalms we read earlier, Psalm 58 and Psalm 59. Both were written by David, but they deal with two different themes. Psalm 58 deals with the problem of unjust leaders and judges in the land. Psalm 59 deals with the injustices being done to David. Both of them are pleas to God for judgment. As we focus on these two Psalms we will also reference other similar Psalms as we try to sort out some problems we have with them, and the nature and purpose of these Psalms.

Some Problems We May Have With The Imprecatory Psalms.

Let’s start with the problems, with three typical problems. First there is the problem of reconciling these Psalms with the rest of the Psalms and the rest of the Scripture. The message of God’s love for us and our loving others with His love runs throughout the Bible from beginning to end. God instructed Israel,

“You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.”³

In Proverbs 25:21-22 we read,

“If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.”

The apostle Paul cited this as he wrote,

“Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. ‘But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’”⁴

These statements may bring Jesus’ words to mind, “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you”⁵ and,

“...love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either.”⁶

But then there are these difficult Psalms. One writer tells us

“The sudden transitions in the psalms from humble devotion to fiery imprecation create an embarrassing problem for the Christian, who is assured that all Scripture is inspired and profitable, but equally that he himself is to bless those who curse him.”⁷

The difficulty is as basic and complex as harmonizing the love, grace and mercy of God with His holiness, righteousness and justice. It is not a matter of Old Testament versus New Testament. Both testaments speak volumes about the love, grace and mercy of God and also about His holiness, righteousness and justice. In Romans 2:4-5 the apostle Paul warns those who take God’s kindness, tolerance and patience lightly are storing up wrath for themselves in the day of God’s righteous judgment. He told the church at Corinth that he had delivered a flagrant, unrepentant sinner to Satan for the destruction of his flesh so that his spirit may be saved.⁸ He told the Galatian churches that those who preach a false gospel are to be accursed.⁹ Revelation 6 tells us that when Christ breaks open the fifth seal those in heaven who were martyred for Him and the gospel will cry out “with a loud voice, saying, ‘How

long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”¹⁰ Later in the book we are told that when God judges sinners the great multitudes in heaven will cry out, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; because His judgments are true and righteous.”¹¹

Yes, the love, grace and mercy of God and His holiness, righteousness and justice go together. Both are part of God’s nature and action. His people are to reflect both. The problem for us includes how to practically fit them together for our situations and responses. Coming to terms with the next two problems helps us frame an answer to this.

We may have the problem of reconciling the pleas for judgment in the imprecatory Psalms with the predominant view of the *civilized world* and *civilized behavior*. Every age, in fact it seems that every generation thinks that it has more wisdom and insight, better values and ideals than the ones that have preceded them. This is part of self-centered and self-deluded human nature. “We are more advanced, more humane,” each generation says. “And so, those pleas for God to judge the wicked no longer have a place in our world. We are beyond that.” And yet, the same evil thoughts and actions continue. The same desire and need for accountability and judgment continues.

If we impose the current *civilized* views of our time as a judge on these Psalms we will not, we cannot understand them correctly. We must evaluate current culture by the unchanging truth of Scripture, not the other way around. Seeing the unity of God’s love, grace and mercy and His holiness, righteousness and justice and then placing Scripture above our world’s views is critical. But there is one more common problem here.

It is the problem that we tend to label and equate the pleas for judgment in these Psalms with our own personal, angry and vindictive feelings. How does Psalm 58 open? Look at it. David writes,

“Do you indeed speak righteousness, O gods? Do you judge uprightly, O sons of men? No, in heart you work unrighteousness; on earth you weigh out the violence of your hands.” (1-2)

David calls unjust leaders to task because they are perverting justice—*justice*, which is based on God’s character, not his own values, let alone his desire for personal revenge. In Psalm 59 he calls on God to judge his enemies because of their sin which violates God’s holiness. Verse 2, they “do *iniquity*.” He pleads with God to judge them, verse 12 says, “On account of the *sin* of their mouth and the words of their lips, let them even be caught in their *pride*, and on account of *curses and lies* which they utter.”

In Psalm 139 we find a deep, urgent plea for God to judge the wicked. Turn to that Psalm. Notice, beginning at verse 19 how King David frames his appeal for judgment.

“O that You would slay the wicked, O God; depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed. For they speak against You [God] wickedly, and Your enemies take Your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate You, O LORD? And do I not loathe those

who rise up against You? I hate them with the utmost hatred;
they have become my enemies.” (19-22)

Yes, the wicked were attacking him, and David called on God to judge them for that. But more importantly, they were opposing and mocking God. This is followed by some lines which are more familiar and quite different. Verse 23.

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my
anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me,
and lead me in the everlasting way.” (23-24)

You see, King David closed this strong plea for judgment by asking God to judge his own heart to make sure there was no “hurtful way” in him toward others, including, and especially toward, the wicked who had hurt him.

Question: Is it easy for you to separate your own personal anger and vindictive feelings from a commitment to God being vindicated? Judging by the New Testament’s forceful statements about anger, it was not easy in the first century, just as it is not easy in the twenty-first century. Paul wrote that outbursts of anger and disputes are “deeds of the flesh,” works of our sinful nature,¹² and that we are never to take our own revenge, but to leave room for the wrath of God.¹³ James wrote that “everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger; for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God.”¹⁴

To understand these Psalms properly we need to overcome the problems of reconciling them with the rest of Scripture, with the predominant view of the *civilized world* and *civilized behavior*, and with our own angry and vindictive feelings. Need I point out that this can be a very difficult task?

The Nature And Purpose Of The Imprecatory Psalms.

Now let’s consider the nature and purpose of these Psalms. First, we need to remember that these Psalms are grounded in God’s sovereignty. Here in Psalm 59 David pictures God’s sovereignty in verse 8, “But You, O LORD, laugh at them; You scoff at all the nations.” We saw the same picture in Psalm 2. “He who sits in the heavens laughs, the Lord scoffs at them” (4). The ones God laughed and scoffed at in that Psalm were the nations who rebelled against Him and His anointed. God is sovereign. No one, nothing can, will dislodge Him from His throne or defeat His righteous judgment. King David based his plea for God to judge the wicked on God’s sovereignty.

Psalm 139 opens with, and continues mostly describing God’s sovereign wisdom and understanding of David. There is nothing about him, about us, God does not know. There are no experiences or places where God does not go with him, with us. Then, in verse 19, he turns to his plea for God to slay the wicked.

These Psalms are grounded in a solid, unshakable knowledge that God is sovereign. The Psalmists call on sovereign God to bring about His righteous judgment. It is the same

promise that underscores the model prayer that Jesus gave us, the plea “Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”¹⁵ We can pray that based on the fact that God is sovereign.

It is only with that foundation that we come to the purpose of these Psalms as a plea for God’s righteous judgment. The pleas are, to state the obvious, very strong. Psalm 58:6-9.

“O God, shatter their teeth in their mouth; break out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD. Let them flow away like water that runs off; when he aims his arrows, let them be as headless shafts. Let them be as a snail which melts away as it goes along, like the miscarriages of a woman which never see the sun. Before your pots can feel the fire of thorns He will sweep them away with a whirlwind, the green and the burning alike.”

Turn back to Psalm 35:5,

“Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them on. Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them ... Let destruction come upon him unawares, and let the net which he hid catch himself; into that very destruction let him fall.” (5-6, 8)

Or turn ahead to Psalm 109:6,

“Appoint a wicked man over him, and let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is judged, let him come forth guilty, and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few; let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow.” (6-9)

The Psalms, we know, are poetry. The writers frequently add one statement to another, sometimes piling them up as they do here, to paint a multidimensional word picture of their point. Each description can stand on its own, but the intent here in these imprecatory Psalms is to paint a vivid, attention arresting picture of God’s certain, righteous, devastating judgment on sin and sinners.

As well, these are far from the only strong words of judgement in the Scriptures and, again, there is not a disconnect between the Old and New Testaments on this. We turn to the New Testament. In Matthew 23 Jesus unleashed a seven-fold series of *woes* on the hypocritical scribes and Pharisees, capping it off with

“Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell? Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and

persecute from city to city, so that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.”

(32-35)

The writer of Hebrews declared “It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”¹⁶ So it should not surprise us, indeed we should expect strong descriptions of God’s righteous judgment on sin.

While we may be able see and accept this, we are still faced with the question “What is God’s purpose of these Psalms *for us?*” One purpose is that they are a means, a way to praying and working through our frustration and anger at the sin and injustice around us and to us. When I read through these two Psalms and the eight others listed in Monday’s notes of *In My Life This Week*, I see men struggling with and working to get through, to get past their frustration and anger. They expressed a wide range of emotions and show us some of their process of framing and reframing their own feelings in God’s perspective.

Don’t you wish that when people do terrible things to others, to people you care about, to you, that there would be an automatic focus button for your frustration and anger? Early television sets had focus controls. You could turn the knob and, hopefully, get the picture sharply focused. Then came the automatic focus buttons that offered to do it for you. *Just push the button!*

There isn’t an automatic focus button for our feelings and response to terrible things. But there is a process of looking to, relying on, waiting on God. God can use our praying through those situations and feelings, praying through these Psalms as part of the process leading to our feelings, our view of our world being back in focus.

There is one more purpose of these Psalms that is often overlooked. These Psalms are a channel to submitting to God and returning to praise. Look at Psalm 59. After fifteen verses of pleading with God to deliver him from the wicked, of describing their actions and asking God to judge them, the king’s final words, verse 16.

“But as for me, I shall sing of Your strength; yes, I shall joyfully sing of Your lovingkindness in the morning, for You have been my stronghold and a refuge in the day of my distress. O my strength, I will sing praises to You; for God is my stronghold, the God who shows me lovingkindness.” (16-17)

Go back to Psalm 58. After nine verses of challenging the unjust leaders and calling on God to judge them, the king closes, verse 10,

“The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will wash his feet in the blood of the wicked. And men will say, ‘Surely there *is* a reward for the righteous; surely there *is* a God who judges on earth!’” (10-11)

We see the same pattern in Psalm 7 which closes with King David saying “I will give thanks to the LORD according to His righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High.” And the last of these Psalms, Psalm 140, concludes, “I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted and justice for the poor. Surely the righteous will give thanks to Your name; the upright will dwell in Your presence.” (12-13)

Through the process King David’s focus moved from himself, his fears, anger, frustration and how he might handle the problems himself, to God. These Psalms do not end with, none of them end with the wicked *being* judged. They end with the Psalmist submitting to and relying on sovereign, loving God. With that came the song in the night, a confident song of praise and thankfulness to God who would, who will judge everyone and everything righteously, perfectly in His time.

Conclusion.

As we wrap this up, think about how we—about how you and I—should use these Psalms. The option of turning the praise, of skipping over them, is not one God gives us. The answer may not come easily.

The situation of King David and the several other writers was different than ours in that they wrote under God’s direction, moved along by the Holy Spirit. So their calling for judgment on God’s enemies was both a statement in their time and, particularly in David’s case as one who prefigured Christ, prophetic of God’s final judgment.

What is clear is that we can not truly pray these prayers to express our own hurt feelings, anger and desire for revenge. Further, to use these Psalms rightly we need to deal with any and all sin in our lives, to face it, confess it and turn from it.

As well, while we find people asking God for and even pronouncing God’s judgment on sinners in both the Old and New Testaments, that is much less frequent than praying for and blessing sinners, including our enemies. And it is reserved for those who not only wrongfully attack us or others, but who make themselves enemies of God. Then too, our use of these Psalms must be consistent with the truth that God “is patient... not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”¹⁷

As you reflect on these Psalms with God now, thank Him that He is the sovereign, righteous, perfect judge. Ask Him to enable you to recognize, confess and repent of any vindictive feelings you have. Ask God to help you seek righteousness, to show others that righteousness is available only in and through Christ and then to leave the final judgment to Him. He is the sovereign King, He is the righteous Judge. Think of, and follow the process of these Psalm writers when you find yourself hurt, frustrated and angry of moving from the anger, frustration, wounded feelings and vindictiveness to releasing those who have sinned against you and others to God.

¹ cf. Psalm 7:2, 8; 35:11-12; 59:1-4, 13; 69:24; 79:6; 109:1-3; 139:19; 140:5.

² cf. 2 Samuel 4:4; 9:1-13.

³ Leviticus 19:17-18.

⁴ Romans 12:19-20.

⁵ Matthew 5:44.

⁶ Luke 6:27-29.

⁷ Derek Kidner. *Psalms 1-72*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, pages 25-26.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 5:1-5.

⁹ Galatians 1:6-9.

¹⁰ Revelation 6:10.

¹¹ Revelation 19:1-2.

¹² Galatians 3:20.

¹³ Romans 12:19.

¹⁴ James 1:19-20.

¹⁵ Matthew 6:9-10.

¹⁶ Hebrews 10:31.

¹⁷ 2 Peter 3:9.

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