

Chapter 17 The Psalms

Praying Our Pain

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent."

Psalm 22:1-2

We know from personal experience that it can be difficult to stay in the story. We are confronted by traumas and tragedies, persecutions and perplexities, doubts and diseases, betrayals and burdens. We can be filled with such grief and confusion that we feel like our bodies are wasting away and our souls are withering. Frustration and disappointment can become so great that it is hard for us to put one foot in front of the other. The darkness of life can become so overwhelming that we despair of life itself.

To say this is not to discount Yahweh's great blessings and joys, but it is to acknowledge that there are deep sorrows and painful experiences that call in question the future of the story. Our faith in Christ is tested. Is our hope of the resurrection a dream or is it our destiny? Are we subject to fate, ruled by chance, or guided by faith in the all merciful, sovereign Lord of the Universe? It is at such times that the psalms provide the people of God with passionate prayers of lament. For heartbroken, life-threatened believers, the psalms of pain may be a singular blessing tethering the soul to faith in God and sanity.

To pious ears these honest prayers of pain may sound unspiritual. They may offend those who insist on being positive and upbeat. These laments refuse to be prayed with King James intonation. They are shouts and cries from the depth of our being. At times they may even be hissed through clenched teeth. They refuse to be rattled off by rote. It is impossible to pray a cry for help piously. "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in the miry depths, where there is no foothold. I have come into the deep waters; the floods engulf me. I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God. Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head; many are my enemies without cause, those who seek to destroy me" (69:1-4). How can anyone blame God for insomnia in Anglican formality, "You kept my eyes from closing; I was too troubled to speak" (77:4)? These are not statements simply stated, but passions released by a distraught soul. How do you say, in stoic Presbyterian piety, "Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again?" (77:7)? No cheerleader for Jesus has ever prayed, "Why, O Lord, do you reject me and hide your face from me? From my youth I have been afflicted and close to death; I have suffered your terrors and am in despair. Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend" (88:14-18).

To find these heartbreaking laments in the Psalms helps us to stay in the story, not only because they resonate with the harsh realities of life, but because they pour out all their grief to the only One who can truly save us, the Lord. We are given the freedom to pray out our pain and cry out to our Savior. "O Lord, the God who saves me, day and night I cry out before you. May my prayer come before you; turn your ear to my cry" (88:1-2). It is this God-centered focus that sanctifies grief and saves it from becoming whining and grouching. The psalmist is not a crotchety old man, bellyaching about his bumbled life, but a true worshiper whose intensity of pain is proportionate to his devotion and dependence upon God. There may be a fine line between complaining to God and holding God in contempt, but the psalmist never crosses it. We could never use words like griping our nagging to describe these prayers of pain, because they issue from an abiding reverence for the holiness of God. Nor is there anything casual or slipshod about these laments, they are prayers of pain set to music; they are the poetry of an anguished soul crying out to God. The psalms run the gauntlet of pain and suffering. The range and intensity of pain that we encounter in the psalms is complete. Vivid expression is given to physical, emotional and spiritual suffering. All types of

anguish and affliction are lamented. "I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears" (6:6) "The cords of death entangled me; the torrents of destruction overwhelmed me" (18:4). "Be merciful to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief. My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak" (31:9-10). "My back is filled with searing pain; there is no health in my body. I am feeble and utterly crushed; I groan in anguish of heart" (38:7-8). Ironically, these painful expressions are a deep comfort, because they give voice to our pain. They remind us that the people of God suffer.

Sin

Sadly, we bring upon ourselves some of our most painful pain. We have sinned. Our pain is self-inflicted, proving in a most profound way that we are at times our own worst enemy. If all the pain we experienced could be credited to our mortal bodies and our mortal enemies, our capacity for trust and dependence upon the Lord would be far greater. But we have to admit that much of our disappointment with God, disillusionment with life, and dissatisfaction with ourselves stems from our own disobedience. We are often distraught because of what we have done to ourselves, not because of what others have done to us.

Penitential prayers are the most significant laments in the Psalms because they call upon God to purify the soul and set us right with the Lord. Confessional prayer is our first priority. It is our self-inflicted pain that must be prayed out first and foremost. Like King David, we often learn this truth the hard way. "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD'-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin" (32:3-5). In Psalm 38 David admits, "My wounds fester and are loathsome because of my sinful folly. I am bowed down and brought very low; all day long I go about mourning" (38:5-6).

Our sin against God is always greater than those who sin against us. Therefore the Christian's first prayer is always a cry for mercy. "Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared" (130:1-4). If we are to forgive as Christ forgave us (Col 3:13), we must never lose sight of how much we need the Lord's grace and mercy. As Jesus said, "You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Mt 7:5).

David's prayer of confession in Psalm 51 is a powerful reminder of how important it is to pray our pain-- our self-inflicted pain, openly, honestly, sincerely, and passionately. If we are half-hearted in our confession, yet heartbroken over our suffering, we have confused prayer with whining. If our complaint against others is more dear to us than our personal confession of sin, we have misunderstood our true need and hindered the blessing of God in our lives. When we pray our pain may we think first of how we have caused God's pain, and may we pray with David,

"Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight... Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (51:1-4,9-10).

Enemies

God's great mercy and the blessing of his gracious forgiveness, does not, however, result in a trouble-free, pain-free life. Those who pursue God in love and trust will find themselves pursued by the world in hate and envy. To grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ is to become a target for

animosity and hostility. Righteousness often draws out the world's anger and resentment. As Jesus said, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world," Jesus reasoned, "it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you" (Jn 15:18-19). The psalms are an invaluable guide in learning how to deal with hate. Without their empathy and guidance we might find it impossible to stay in the story. The psalms teach us how to pray our pain.

We have not sufficiently appreciated the fact that the poetry of suffering guides the people of God in worship. Painful emotions are rhymed thought by thought, giving voice to feelings that we struggle to put into words. The psalmist felt defenseless, vulnerable, stalked by vicious predators (17:11-12). He feared for his life, "They will tear me like a lion and rip me to pieces with no one to rescue me" (7:2). Enemies are everywhere in the Psalms, uttering contempt (31:11), spreading slander, and plotting death (31:13). They gloat and mock and devise false accusations (35:19-20). "All day long my enemies taunt me; those who rail against me use my name as a curse" (102:8). Judging from the Psalms we would be hard pressed to believe we were true followers of the Lord if we had no enemies. "See how my enemies have increased and how fiercely they hate me!" cries David (25:19). "Many are those who are my vigorous enemies; those who hate me without reason are numerous" (38:19). "How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?" (13:2). Even the beloved Psalm 23 speaks of the terrible reality of enemies (23:5). The people of God find themselves repeatedly praying, "Rescue me from my enemies, O LORD, for I hide myself in you" (143:9).

The psalms use an impressive list of words to describe the enemy, which is to say, there are many forms of persecution to be prayed against. There are slanderers (56:2; 140:11), oppressors (27:11; 119:121), accusers (71:13; 109:20,25,29), those who revile (44:16; 55:3), and those who hate without reason (35:19; 38:19; 69:4). Enemies are bloodthirsty (5:6; 26:9; 55:23; 59:2; 139:19), deceitful (5:6; 43:1; 55:23; 109:2; 144:8) ruthless (35:11; 37:35; 54:3), and violent (17:4; 18:48). The psalmist asks, "What can mortal man do to me?" In one sense enemies can cause a great deal of harm, "All day long they twist my words; they are always plotting to harm me. They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, eager to take my life" (56:5-6). But in another sense they can do no enduring harm. "For you have delivered my soul from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life" (56:13).

The in-your-face reality of enemies is not an Old Testament anachronism. Enemies are not a vestige of ancient spirituality. Millions of sincere believers live under the threat of serious persecution. We can say without fear of contradiction that all those who follow Jesus Christ sincerely and take his righteousness seriously will suffer persecution. Jesus said as much in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Mt 5:10-11). The apostles stressed this. Peter wrote, "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Pet 4:12). John warned, "Do not be surprised, my brothers [and sisters], if the world hates you" (1 Jn 3:13).

If our tendency is to dismiss as irrelevant all this talk of enemies in the Psalms we might be wise to examine our lives. Perhaps our stand for Christ and his righteousness is too hidden and secretive to make these psalms very relevant. There are plenty of zealous Christians who draw fire because they are obnoxious and arrogant, but that is not the kind of opposition the psalms describe. The self-righteous may pride themselves in provoking others through their militancy and triumphalism, but it is the humble believer who the world cannot tolerate. As the apostle Peter wrote,

Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed. "Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened." But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone

who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. 1 Peter 3:13-17

There are many psalms for the persecuted church to pray and for us to pray on behalf of the persecuted church. Through prayer we are reminded that our enemies are not God, God is God. As Psalm 27 declares, "The LORD is my light and my salvation-- whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life-- of whom shall I be afraid? When evil men advance against me to devour my flesh, when my enemies and my foes attack me, they will stumble and fall. Though an army besiege me, my heart will not fear; though war break out against me, even then will I be confident" (27:1-3). We are not left to our own defenses, but we depend upon the Lord. "Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me" (35:1). We do not fight with the weapons of the world. The psalmist prays, "I do not trust in my bow, my sword does not bring me victory; but you give us victory over our enemies, you put our adversaries to shame" (44:6-7; see 2 Cor 10:4). The power to vindicate is not ours, but the Lord's, "Vindicate me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation; rescue me from deceitful and wicked men. You are God my stronghold" (43:1-2).

I picture the persecuted church praying Psalm 46 with courage and confidence: "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging. ...Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts. The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress...Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth."

Hate

There are some prayers in the Psalms that I don't imagine today's persecuted church prays no matter how severe the trial. The often repeated example is the prayer of the exiles against their captors, "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us--he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (139:8). C. S. Lewis called Psalm 109 a "hymn of hate," written by "a hot-blooded barbarian." He was shocked by what the psalmist had in mind for his enemy, such as "May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow...May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children" (109:9,12). There are other examples of prayed out hate. David prayed, "May those who seek my life be disgraced and put to shame; may those who plot my ruin be turned back in dismay. May they be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the Lord driving them away; may their path be dark and slippery, with the angel of the Lord pursuing them" (35:4-6).

There are two extremes in the prayers of pain that point us in either direction of the gospel; one is hate and the other is suffering. Both extremes are dramatic and demonstrate the raw intensity of pain in the Psalms; one extreme points back to Israel's deep roots in the promised land and the other points forward to Israel's Suffering Servant. The Psalms are especially good for where we are in the unfolding story of God's salvation history, but we are reminded that the imprecatory psalms have their own specific time and place. Our first impulse may be to edit the psalms of their ferocious cries of vengeance or try to ignore them altogether.

When we feel the rage of these prayers of hate, several important truths deserve to be remembered. First, the psalmist's outrage against atrocities is in line with God's curse against evil. To abhor sin and evil is to identify with God's judgment and side with his righteousness. "Let those who love the LORD hate evil, for he guards the lives of his faithful ones and delivers them from the hand of the wicked" (97:10). It stands to reason that where there is a passion for God there will be a passion against evil. To cling to the good is to shun evil. "I gain understanding from your precepts; therefore I hate every wrong path"

(119:104). Second, David was called to defend his nation against those who sought to oppress or annihilate Israel. Political and military conquest necessitated violence. Up until the time of the Messiah, Israel was mandated to fight for its survival. They were called to preserve their ethnic and geographic identity and live by the law of God. It would be surprising if the language of the psalms did not express the violence and militancy of the imprecatory psalms. Third, these psalms of passion are carefully constructed national prayers for justice and vindication. They are not personal vendettas or anonymous attacks against specific individuals. They are public prayers for national vindication by God. Fourth, we must not forget that these prayers were directed to the Lord. They are not propaganda, designed to fan the flames of hate; they are prayers to God, crafted to pour out the hate and anger to the Holy One, whose judgment is perfect and final. Fifth, the power and passion of these prayers of hate compare with the apostle John's description of the final judgment against evil in the book of Revelation. They remind us of Jesus' description of how it will be at the end of the age. "The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 13:49-50).

The value of these psalms should not be dismissed. They point back to an earlier era in salvation history, but they also teach us to deal with our hate through prayer. We can choose to meet evil with evil or we can overcome evil with good by praying out our pain. Instead of venting our hate on others we can pray out our hate to the Holy God. Nevertheless, these extreme psalms fit the war years of Israel and God's final judgment of the world better than they fit the persecuted body of Christ at prayer. Jesus inaugurated a whole new order. Now, we have the gospel to give to the nations. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:43-45).

The Cross

If the psalms of hate recall Israel's struggle for survival, the psalms of passion look forward to Israel's Messiah, the Savior of the world. We cannot hear David's cry in Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" without immediately thinking of Jesus on the cross. The extreme suffering and depth of passion portrayed in this poetry goes beyond David's anguish and points forward to Israel's Suffering Servant. In describing his own desperate state, David was unaware that he was writing prophecy. He wrote far better than he knew. Metaphors that described his pain, were fulfilled literally when the Son of David was nailed to the cross. "My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death. Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me. They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing" (22:15-18). Jesus saw himself in these passion psalms. They shaped his God-centered consciousness. He found in them, not a script to echo, but a guide to prayer that identified and empathized with his pain and suffering. How David felt was what Jesus experienced in the most literal sense imaginable.

If there is any psalm which captures what Jesus might have prayed in Gethsemane it is Psalm 69. No other psalm is used as much in the New Testament to explain the suffering of Christ than this psalm. It provides painful commentary for Jesus' prayer, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). The psalm begins, "Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck...I am worn out calling for help; my throat is parched. My eyes fail, looking for my God" (69:1-3). The next line, "Those who hate me without reason outnumber the hairs of my head," was used by Jesus himself to explain to the disciples that the opposition of the Jews had been prophesied (Jn 15:25). Later the disciples recalled Psalm 69 to understand Jesus' passion, "For zeal for your house consumes me, and the insults of those who insult you fall on me" (69:9; see Jn 2:17; Rom 15:3). What David felt figuratively, Jesus experienced literally. "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst" (69:21; see Mt 27:34,48; Jn 19:28). The psalmist felt removed from God, "Do not hide your face from your servant; answer me quickly, for I am in trouble" (69:17), but Jesus felt abandoned, "My God,

my God why have you forsaken me."

But in one very important way Psalm 69 reverts to the past and the experience of Jesus on the cross points forward. The psalmist curses his enemies and Jesus forgives them. David prayed for judgment, "Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents. For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt. Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous" (69:23-28). But Jesus prayed for grace, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34). That is not to say the psalmist is wrong in praying for judgment. The apostle Peter will use these very same words to describe the fate of Judas (69:25; Acts 1:20), but Jesus holds out the gospel even to his persecutors.

The prayers of pain that we find in the Psalms remind us that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ has experienced the full extent of pain and suffering. He will never ask us to endure what he has not already endured on our behalf. He has taken the place of Isaac on the altar and Job on the ash heap. He knows how Jeremiah felt in the pit and how David felt running for his life. Our Lord has done everything to redeem and save us. The Psalms of pain emphasize the full extent of what we need saving from and point to the only one who is able to save us.

Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits-- who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion...For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. Psalms 103:1-12