

Uncomfortable Psalm 109

Introduction:

Well everyone, we're continuing to look at examples of different psalms during this time. Today we're talking about the really uncomfortable psalm that was read to us just a moment ago.

I really hope that at the end of this morning we'll understand what we read and see in this psalm and others like it. I hope that we might even be tempted to bring this kind of prayer into our lives, because I honestly think it would be good for us.

But let's pray now.

Prayer:

Imprecatory Psalms & Psalms Generally:

So a very fast review, in case you missed two weeks ago. A common way to categorize the psalms is to divvy them up between "hymns of praise" and "songs of complaint and lament." (The Psalms & The Life of Faith, Walter Brueggemann, 268ff.) Lament, again, is a fancy word for whatever form our sadness and sorrow and grief takes when we give voice to it.

Some psalms in this second category are called "Imprecatory Psalms." Imprecatory Psalms. "Imprecatory" comes from the word "Imprecation,"

which is a fancy way to say curse. And not, “swear word curse” but “May you die slowly and painfully *twice* curse.” We all know the difference, right?

Psalms 109 is an Imprecatory Psalm, a curse-filled psalm, although it also gives voice to lament & grief—it's just very well-rounded. Like that one friend of yours. Like me.

It's subtitled, “of David,” and there are many other Psalms in our Bibles that are specifically linked to David or events in David's life. Rabbis over time would sort of attribute all of the Psalms to David, the same way Moses was attributed with the first five books of the Bible. (cf. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 520ff.) And the book we call “Psalms,” actually went through all sorts of different stages of development before it was finalized in the form we have today—five “books” or groupings of Psalms, with various collections within them (Childs, 508ff., Intro to the Psalms in Harper Collins NRSV Study Bible)

God's people have always used the psalms, turned to them, based our worship off of them, and found in them words to give voice to our own place in life, even though they were written for situations long removed from us. So the Psalms are critical. All of them; even the awkward ones, like Psalm 109.

Let's look at it again.

Psalm 109

First, let's re-read it. Really enter into the emotion here, if you can. If you want to read along, and didn't bring a Bible, this is on page 602 of the ones under our chairs.

**1 My God, whom I praise,
do not remain silent,**

**2 for people who are wicked and deceitful
have opened their mouths against me;
they have spoken against me with lying
tongues.**

**3 With words of hatred they surround me;
they attack me without cause.**

**4 In return for my friendship they accuse me,
but I am a man of prayer.**

**5 They repay me evil for good,
and hatred for my friendship.**

**6 Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy;
let an accuser stand at his right hand.**

**7 When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
and may his prayers condemn him.**

8 May his days be few;

may another take his place of leadership.

***9 May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow.***

***10 May his children be wandering beggars;
may they be driven [a] from their ruined
homes.***

***11 May a creditor seize all he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his
labor.***

***12 May no one extend kindness to him
or take pity on his fatherless children.***

***13 May his descendants be cut off,
their names blotted out from the next
generation.***

***14 May the iniquity of his fathers be
remembered before the LORD;
may the sin of his mother never be blotted
out.***

***15 May their sins always remain before the
LORD,
that he may blot out their name from the
earth.***

**16 For he never thought of doing a kindness,
but hounded to death the poor
and the needy and the brokenhearted.**

**17 He loved to pronounce a curse—
may it come on him.
He found no pleasure in blessing—
may it be far from him.**

**18 He wore cursing as his garment;
it entered into his body like water,
into his bones like oil.**

**19 May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
like a belt tied forever around him.**

**20 May this be the LORD's payment to my
accusers,
to those who speak evil of me.**

**21 But you, Sovereign LORD,
help me for your name's sake;
out of the goodness of your love, deliver
me.**

**22 For I am poor and needy,
and my heart is wounded within me.**

**23 I fade away like an evening shadow;
I am shaken off like a locust.**

**24 My knees give way from fasting;
my body is thin and gaunt.**

**25 I am an object of scorn to my accusers;
when they see me, they shake their heads.**

**26 Help me, LORD my God;
save me according to your unfailing love.**

**27 Let them know that it is your hand,
that you, LORD, have done it.**

**28 While they curse, may you bless;
may those who attack me be put to shame,
but may your servant rejoice.**

**29 May my accusers be clothed with disgrace
and wrapped in shame as in a cloak.**

**30 With my mouth I will greatly extol the
LORD;
in the great throng of worshipers I will
praise him.**

**31 For he stands at the right hand of the
needy,
to save their lives from those who would
condemn them.**

(Psalm

109 TNIV)

Walking Through the Psalm:

The psalm starts with David calling out for God to notice what's going on with him; don't be silent because wicked and deceitful people are accusing me. They're lying and slandering and attacking me--and I'm just trying to be friendly. In v6 David tells God to "Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy; let an accuser stand at his right hand." It's been noted that this isn't a request for some guy to come and point fingers at his enemy, but a "special prosecutor" a trained accuser, a word that becomes a name later in Jewish tradition for the devil, the "satan"--which means "accuser" (83, MOTP:ATC; Brueggeman, somewhere.) And after this call for special prosecution, for God to send the Devil after the guy, David just sort of goes off, right?

Don't just let the accuser find him guilty; let his own prayers condemn him. Let him die soon. Kill him; make his wife a widow, make his children beggars, let his house be destroyed; no, wait: better: let a creditor take everything, let strangers plunder his stuff.

"May no one take pity on his fatherless children." Kill his family line. God; remember his parent's sin, when you look at him. And get his parents too. And don't forget, God that he was a bad man: he "hounded to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted."

Pay him back, God, wrap his body in the curses he doled out forever. He didn't practice any loving kindness, so don't give any to him. (cf. *The Psalms & The Life of Faith*, Brueggemann, 276ff.)

And then David lists out why God should do all this: He appeals to God for God's name's sake, because God is who he is, powerful and just. God's reputation is on the line here.

He appeals to God because of God's love--and this is that special sort of covenant-only, always faithful love.

He uses his own experience as an appeal, listing off the terrible shape he's in: take this guy out, Lord, because I'm poor and needy and my heart is wounded within me. Look at my body! I'm weak; I'm thin and gaunt. I'm dismissed and scorned

One scholar, looking at these things David is pointing, calls them appeals to God's "majesty," "faithfulness," and "compassion." Majesty, faithfulness, and compassion. And he notes that this appeal is "as comprehensive a motivation as we could imagine....Israel's entire understanding of God is mobilized." (*The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Walter Brueggemann, 82)

Mobilized in anger, though, right? David is asking God to take out this guy, and this guys parents, and this

guys children. Disgrace and Shame everybody who has ever hurt me, but especially him.

And after this, almost awkwardly, the Psalm ends:

“With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord; in the great throng of worshipers I will praise him. For he stands at their right hand of the needy, to save their lives from those who would condemn them.”

The Psalm ends with this commitment to praise God with God’s people, because God does what God does, is who God is; the advocate and savior of the needy. David turns away from his enemies, and back to himself, God, and the relationship they have.

But it’s a little weird to do, right, because it’s not like God has done anything yet? David lets fly with what the author I just quoted earlier calls a “a free, unrestrained speech of rage seeking vengeance” (TMOP:ATC, 85). And then, when when this rage has been tossed to the Lord, vomited out, the psalm ends with this reminder of who God is. David's anger is just sort of spent, diffused. This same author notes that

“...such rage is not only brought into [God’s] presence. It is submitted to [God] and relinquished to him. In the end this psalm shows the way in which free, unrestrained speech of rage is given over to the claims of the covenant partner” (***The Message of the***

Psalms: A Theological Commentary, Walter Brueggemann, 85).

We'll spend the rest of the morning, in one way or another, talking about this.

Summary:

But again: there is deep anger, hatred being expressed here. And it's expressed to God. David turns to the Lord and lets fly, you know: says things a Christian should never say--maybe--and he spends his emotion, and in the end, returns to God, God's goodness, and a commitment to worship God because of who He is.

Difficult:

And what makes this psalm or others like it is not *usually* a theological issue, not really. What makes psalms like this difficult--prayers like this difficult--is that the emotion--the anger, or grief, or hatred, or doubt--is so authentic and exposed that we're uncomfortable with it. We're just uncomfortable with it. It doesn't seem like a thing one of God's people should say.

But most of us at least want to say stuff like this, we relate to or envy the honesty we read here. I mean, we might sometimes relate to deep grief, we might sometimes relate to deep joy, but man, nearly all of us have been intimate with anger now and then.

Still, we just can't believe that this good book would suggest we give voice to such terrible thoughts.

I mean, good people don't say these things, right? They don't even read them! Good people don't express anger, right? Good Christians are to be perfect, as their heavenly father is perfect, and no longer experience frustration or anger or anxiety or despair or any emotion at all, but bathe in the perfect peace and stillness of God's love.

I'm sorry. But that's a lie; that's not Christianity, it's Buddhism. But we still believe it.

Reasons:

But there are lots of reasons we believe it, right? And the main reason is that we've been trained to believe it.

Trained by Relationships:

Relationships have trained us to believe that if we emote, we're going to get punished, or we're going to be dismissed, but we aren't going to be rewarded. And we've learned that we had better not. We learned early on that if we get too upset, we'll be shut-down. If we get too angry, we'll be put in the corner. What we haven't learned, and what David models, is a way to emote constructively and well.

Trained by the Church:

And the Church has, unfortunately, reinforced this stuff. We expect to be punished somehow if we swear, or if we make a scene. We expect to be quoted at-- we've all been quoted at, right? Very helpful, isn't it?

We hold up as models those who seem to have very little negative emotion at all; and then of course, we abandon these same people when for whatever reason, the garbage they've been stuffing away breaks out into their lives in some sin or meltdown. This is not best Christian practices.

And we are hypocritical in this, so often: If I stub my toe, and yell out the Son of a Bitter Man; it's okay. But if I had said something else, we would wonder at my spiritual maturity and my ability to lead.

The church has sent to us mixed messages about how to deal with emotion, and is confused about what is okay and not okay emotionally, and has forgotten, that we are emotional beings.

And this is weird, because we all want to be people with hearts after God's own, and David who had one, asked God to wipe out the family tree of his enemies.

Again, the Lesson:

We need to learn the right way to emote. We need to learn David's--and the other Psalmists'--ways of

dealing with their anger and their grief and their despair...and their joy, too. A way that is constructive and turns us back to God.

And a wonderful story I heard that talks about this uses the image of a bow and arrow; the fact that bows are made to shoot arrows, like humans are made to feel deeply. And yet, if you pull and release a bow for kicks too often it'll break: it's not made to keep the force it produces inside itself; it's made to send the force out of itself through an arrow.

And you aren't supposed to kill people with the thing, right? Arrows have targets. We don't shoot arrows at people, or pets, or our bosses, or strangers: we shoot them where they are supposed to go.

And David models the way that God is supposed to be the target of our emotions, God should be the target of our emotions.

God already knows what we're feeling: the hatred & the rage & the despair & the fear--whatever it is. It's not like it surprises him. But we people, made to experience emotion, living in a world that gives rise to a lot of negative emotion, need to send it somewhere. I want us to believe this. We need to send this emotion somewhere. We can't just keep it inside, or else like a bow that's strung without an arrow in it too often, we'll break apart, and our shattering won't just hurt us, it

will leave scars on others and our relationships.

And many of us know people who have broken down in these ways. Too many of us in this room are on our way there. We ourselves occasionally have little bitty explosions of our own, because we've just never let this stuff out.

We hold it in, all the force of our hatred, resentment, sadness, fear, anxiety, even more rarely, joy.

Encouraging?

So am I encouraging you to swear, to curse, to be angry and let fly: yes I am. Totally. But not to your child, to your spouse or your dog or to the guy who cut you off in traffic or your boss or the coach or president or terrorist or murderer or insulting, or greedy, or dismissive, or hypocritical person. Or to yourself. (Especially not to your pastor. jk.)

I am not encouraging us to tell dirty jokes, or pepper our speech with crass language and images so that we can be relevant hipsters, or seem cool to our pals.

But I am encouraging you to rage, and I am encouraging you to sob and I am encouraging you to rejoice with selfless abandon. I am encouraging you to shoot these emotions to the Lord, to the target. The only one who is able to snuff them out, and when we've settled down, who can turn us to himself, and

help us to commit again to worshipping God because God is who God is.

I wonder at how many people over time have read Psalm 109, screamed it to God, and then moved on to Psalm 131, "I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; my soul is like the weaned chat that is with me." In doing this, they have been in some small way healed.

Rhetoric:

So Let it out, let it out, let it out. But don't let it out at me, don't vomit your emotion on me; it's not mine, and I don't need it. The driver in front of you doesn't need it, your spouse or friend doesn't need it. And you'll only make a mess that you'll have to clean up.

But you have got to let it out. Anger, sadness, despair, fear: do you really think you're hiding this from God? Do we really believe God doesn't notice it? Do we really believe God likes us better because we smile and resort to platitudes and easy phrases when we wish we could die, or someone else would? Does God like Christian swear words more than real ones? Or do we worship the faithful, majestic, compassionate God who knows all about us, and loves us anyway, and just wants us to draw close to him authentically and honestly. If he answers before we call, don't you think he might be aware of what we're calling about?

And some of us are dying, are close to dead inside because we have spent our lives bottling up stuff that we should have just let out, an emotional arrow the Lord, ages ago.

Rich's Joy Clause:

And I'm almost positive that if we practice stuffing anger and suppressing grief, I don't think we'll be able to experience joy the way we want to & God wants us to. I don't think we can cut up our emotional lives that way, expect the "joy" or "pleasure" part of us to work really well, and the "anger and sadness" part of us to never show up.

Part of the reason little children show such happiness, such joy, is that they also haven't yet learned, I think, to hide and refuse anger and sadness. Bo will cycle through anger, sadness, and joy in like...there. That amount of time. I'm not a parent, but I know some, and little kids will cycle through anger, sadness, and joy in like....there.

Now. Maturity is controlling our emotions, choosing to experience them fully in safe, constructive ways: which is everything we've been talking about this morning. Most people can do this, some cannot, for various reasons, but most can. So I'm not saying we should hit each other when someone has the toy we want, wish we would die when we face negative consequences, or have the best day of your life if

you're allowed a cookie before you eat dinner.

But, if I can ignore context completely, maybe part of turning to the Kingdom of God with childlike faith is trusting our emotions to the Lord as though we ourselves were children again, and he our safe parent who could receive & diffuse them with his gracious love, so we can get on with the business of living for his glory, worshipping him together.

Living:

And Let me share just a couple things we need to be aware of if we're going to live out the example of Psalm 109 well.

Living: Comparing

We need to forget the whole, "Well, so-and-so has it worse." That might be true, it might be true. Someone almost always does. And it's very mature and thoughtful of you. But if we use the "so-and-so has it worse" to avoid engaging with the hurt and anger in our lives, or "so-and-so has it better" to avoid dealing with happiness, then we've forgotten that the Bible says "every heart knows it's own sorrow" (Psalm 34) and that all of us have experiences that are ours, we lead our own lives not other peoples', and we need to be authentic with our own hearts.

Living: Unexpected Emotion

Frederick Buechner says we should pay attention to

unexpected tears, because of course, I think, they can point out to us the deep emotion we've bottled up inside ourselves. We should pay attention to over-the-top anger responses for the same reason: They are signs to us that we are holding in some things that should not be held in, but should be sent out to the Lord and diffused in his love. We should maybe even pay attention to unexpected happiness, in the off chance that we've got some deep joy inside us that needs tapped and drunk deeply.

When did you last shoot your arrows of anger toward another person, instead of the Lord? When did it last threaten to shatter you? When were we last authentic with our own hearts? I will talk with any of us about these things for as long as we want to talk about them.

Conclusion...Or Beginning?

The Psalms used to be the church's prayer-book. We prayed David's anger, and it released us from holding in our own. We prayed the psalmists' loss, and our heart was pushed toward healing because of it. It can still be this, and beyond this, it must be a model for us of how to pray, how to be authentic and real before the Lord. How to share with God what God already knows.

Go to these Psalms; run to them. Learn from them. Teach them to your children and your friends. Live the

prayer-life they model in them. Psalm 109 and those like it, they aren't the problem. The problem is how poor a job we've done being honest with ourselves about what we feel, and vulnerable before the Lord with it.

Take up your bows; shoot your arrows to the Lord. Grieve and Curse, and in the end, return to the fact that God is good, God is good, and find stillness and hope for yourselves in his love.

Prayer:

Father, we are needy, and we need you at our right hand. Help us to be authentic and honest before you. Help us to release to you our emotions, giving them to you instead of taking them out on anyone or anything around us. And teach us to pray with the vulnerability that David prayed. May we be a people who position one another to come before you so nakedly, but without shame. In Jesus' name. Amen.