

A song for my indignation

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- [0 : 0 0] But let's pray first of all. Heavenly Father, we come to you today knowing that we need your spirit to illuminate our hearts and minds.
- We pray the words of the psalmist in Psalm 119. Cause me to understand the way of your precepts, that I may meditate on your wonderful deeds.
- And Father, as you give us understanding, give us also a desire to walk in your ways, confident that what you say is good. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.
- Now as we begin, let me just say another prayer. Dear God, you know how terrible my neighbour has been lately? How she keeps throwing rubbish into my backyard even though I've spoken to her many times?
- And you know also my annoying colleague who's basically been sabotaging my project with his poor attitude. So please, Lord, let my neighbour's house be seized and repossessed.
- [1 : 0 1] Let my colleague be sacked and replaced. And may their children be cast out, doomed and left in eternal poverty. Amen. Amen?
- Sounds so wrong, doesn't it? And yet, isn't it what this psalm seems to be saying? And that makes us uncomfortable.
- What in the world is this psalm doing in our Bibles? Is it for real? I mean, I can see that the title of today's sermon is A Song for My Indignation, which the dictionary defines as anger against unfair treatment.
- But the psalmist seems to be over the top. No? So maybe this psalm shouldn't be in our Bibles. Indeed, in recent times, that's exactly how some people have treated it.
- In BEM or SIB circles, we don't use a lectionary, which is basically a list of sad Bible readings to be read every Sunday. But there are denominations who do.
- [2 : 0 4] And in the Catholic lectionary, Pope Paul VI decreed that this psalm, along with some others, must not be included. And it isn't just the Catholics.
- C.S. Lewis, whom I quote often in my sermons, certainly didn't like this psalm. In his opinion, this psalm is a hymn of hate written by a hot-blooded barbarian.
- So for him, yes, we can keep it in our Bibles, but only as a negative example of how anger can so naturally overtake us.
- Or as the wrestling shows used to say, you can watch, but don't try this at home. But we mustn't dismiss this psalm so easily.
- Why? Let me give you two reasons. The first is biblical. We can't dismiss this psalm because there is plenty of such language, not just in Psalm 109, but all over the psalms.
- [3 : 0 4] Psalm 109 is probably where you'll find it in its most concentrated form, but it is present elsewhere. I've put some examples on your outline, but let me just read one of them on the screen.
- Psalm 69, verses 24 to 28. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.

So we can't escape such language. Not even if we go to the New Testament. Take Galatians 5, verse 12 and 1 Corinthians 16, 22, for example.

As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves. If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed.

Come, Lord. So it isn't simply a case of Old Testament bad and full of anger and New Testament good and full of love.

[4 : 25] No. The fact is, both have the language of love. After all, where does Jesus get his language of loving your neighbor? Or where does Peter get his language of not repaying evil for evil from?

Answer. The Old Testament is full of the language of love. And both have the language of curse and judgment.

So we cannot use Old Testament bad, New Testament good as a way to get away from this psalm. But the second reason we shouldn't dismiss this psalm, as I hope we'll see by the end of this sermon, is pastoral.

If we feel uncomfortable with this psalm, it perhaps says more about us and the kind of lives we live than it does about God and the psalmist. You see, many of us, relatively speaking, have comfortable lives.

Now, there might be a couple of exceptions in a crowd this big. I want to acknowledge that. But many of us probably haven't faced a trauma of abuse or persecution or exploitation at a particularly deep level.

[5 : 39] When we get angry, it's probably more because of the bad customer service we got when ordering Zeus coffee rather than some form of profound injustice that has been done against us.

And that's why this psalm can sound over the top to our ears. But what if we face, or will face, a level of injustice far worse than just bad customer service?

Well, this psalm actually brings nothing less than relief and healing. So let's try to get to grips with this psalm. It is tough reading. But as the great preacher Spurgeon once said, it tests our teachableness, but let us learn to be teachable.

So let's wrestle with this portion of scripture so that we can grow in our understanding of it so that we won't misapply it, but by rightly submissive to it.

So we'll go through this in three sections. First section, the big crisis. The big crisis. The psalmist begins verse 1 by pleading, God, don't be silent.

[7 : 00] Look, those around me are certainly not silent and they are using their words as weapons. They are wicked, verse 2, and more than that, they are deceitful. They speak lies against me.

They bear false witness about me. They have slandered me and defamed me and thrown mud on my good name. And they do this, verse 3, without cause.

Their motivation is simply hatred against me. I have done nothing to deserve this. I am thoroughly innocent. Can you feel his anguish?

And the pain is increased because of who is doing this to him. These are not distant, faceless enemies. No, verse 4, these are friends.

These are people whom he has shown a great kindness and love to, and they have not responded in kind. Instead, verse 5, they repay me for good and hatred for my friendship.

[8 : 09] This is nothing less than betrayal. So what's going on? We don't know exactly. The psalmist is David.

We're told that at the top of this psalm. And while there are a couple of incidents in David's life that could theoretically fit this, we're just not sure. But it doesn't matter too much.

The key thing to notice here is that the opposition to him is primarily verbal. And at first you might think, okay, David, what's the big deal?

I know, I know. It's never nice whenever people insult you and put you down and make you feel small. But in the end, these are just words, right?

Sticks and stones might break my bones, but words will never hurt me. But actually, that is not true.

[9 : 09] Verbal attacks are actually quite common in the Psalms, and you will find them too in the New Testament. Those of you studying 1 Peter in the home groups will see that. And the Bible actually takes it seriously.

For these are not mere words. Have a look down in verse 20 and 25 and 29, and notice, these people are consistently described as accusers.

And false accusations can have very serious social consequences. Have you ever been the recipient of baseless gossip and felt the powerlessness as you realize that now everyone in the office looks at you differently?

Have you ever experienced a sense of disorientation when formerly friendly people all of a sudden now keep a distance from you? Well, David can sympathize.

Down in verse 23, he describes this feeling as a fading away like an evening shadow, as if you are not there at all. He knows what it's like.

[10 : 27] And false accusations can be life-eltering, even deadly. For David, it not only exposed him to psychological stress, but open him to legal punishment in the court of law.

What if he is condemned and sentenced to death as a result of such false accusations? That really could happen.

And such consequential verbal violence remains a very real possibility today, especially in the age of social media. how easy it is, isn't it, for lies and slander to go viral on WhatsApp and Facebook and Twitter and TikTok.

And before you know it, someone's life is completely destroyed? There are countless examples. in 2022, when there was a public scare going around in the United States about monkeypox, which is a viral illness that can cause people to develop a painful rash, there was a lady named Lily Simon who was filmed without her knowledge on the train.

Lily had neurofibromatosis type 1, which is a genetic condition that causes tumours to grow at her nerve endings. But the person who filmed her got the wrong idea.

[11 : 56] He posted the video on TikTok accusing her of riding around with monkeypox and therefore being reckless. Immediately, it went viral with comments flooding in, including derogatory ones about what an irresponsible person she was, with some even threatening violence against her.

Or take another Australian man who was taking a selfie with a cutout of Darth Vader at a shop. A young mother mistakenly believed he was taking photos of her children and so she snapped a picture of him, posted it on Facebook and warned people about this so-called creep.

Before he knew it, he was wrongly labelled as a sex offender at risk of losing his job and even received death threats. Or perhaps most sad of all was the case of Manaf Singh, an Indian teenager who was falsely accused of sexual harassment on Instagram stories and so was bullied, shamed, and eventually committed suicide.

So do you see how falsehood and verbal violence in some ways can harm you even more than mere physical violence?

just imagine facing tons of unjust accusations and losing your job, your social ties, your reputation with no opportunity to clear your name, no avenue of escape, no safety net in place.

[13 : 33] This is no small crisis. And you would cry out to God not to be silent when your innocence is at stake, wouldn't you?

You see, Psalm 109 begins to make more sense when you face a deep, life-altering injustice rather than just bad customer service at Zeus Coffee.

Psalm 109 helps us name the ugly parts of our human experience and gives us permission to disclose this to the loving and listening ear of our God.

And it gives a voice to voiceless victims. When we look down to verses 22 to 25, we can see how much this impacted David. David is in a desperate position.

I am poor and needy, he says, verse 22. My heart is wounded within me. I fade away like an evening shadow.

[14 : 39] I am shaken off like a locust. You know how when a small insect lands near you and you just flick it away with your finger without a second thought? That is how David feels right now and after thought, easily flick away.

He is an object of scorn, verse 25, reflected in his physical appearance, verse 24. Someone who is clearly in a helpless and vulnerable place.

He is meant to be a king, but at this very moment he is less king and more victim. He is someone without real power.

He is someone unable to right this wrong. he is at the mercy of his perpetrators. When you are a victim of false accusations or sexual abuse or spiritual abuse or some other real trauma and no one can help you or even believe you, you would call out upon the God of justice to help, wouldn't you?

And this psalm says the good news is you can do that. However big the crisis, you can still have a voice.

[16 : 09] I'm not sure if anyone here today needs to hear that, but notice the psalm gives us a voice to cry out to God. And that brings us to the second section of our psalm today, the strong prayer.

The strong prayer. How does David respond to the verbal attack of his enemies? Answer, with words as well.

As a man of prayer, verse 4, he prays. Now that is so easy to miss, isn't it? But we must not overlook the fact that verse 6 onwards is not fundamentally a denunciation, but a prayer.

He is not swearing at others, but praying to God. He is offering what scholars call an imprecation. Now what is an imprecation?

Well, there is an Old Testament scholar called David Firth, and he has written a book called Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms. And that title is a good summary of what biblical imprecation is.

[17 : 28] Technically speaking, it is an invocation of judgment, but really it is surrendering retribution to God. Instead of seeking vengeance against the offender, it is handing those offenses over to God in prayer.

In other words, it is us saying, God, I will seek vengeance, but will you penalize them in the way you see fit, in accordance with your justice?

I will act, but will you? can you see the difference? And that is exactly what David is doing.

When you read 1 Samuel, where we have the story of David's life, we realize that although David had a number of opportunities for revenge, he never takes it.

For a big part of his life, he is on the run from King Saul, who is seeking unfairly to kill him, but he himself never raises a hand against him. Once he was literally by Saul's bedside, able to kill his fast asleep enemy, should he wish to, but he never does so.

[18 : 48] It is not for him to act and to judge. For he knows Deuteronomy 32. He knows God says, vengeance is mine, I will repay, not you.

It's what Paul picks up on in Romans 12 verse 19 when he says, don't take revenge, but leave room for God's wrath. And so David prays, please God, put such a man on trial.

Appoint a prosecutor, an accuser, verse 6. Let him be tried and found guilty, verse 7. Let even his prayers condemn him.

Literally, it says something like, let even his prayers miss the mark. And so David is saying something like, let even his desperate appeals fail.

Again, it is very strong language, but what David is praying is really, don't let this man get away with it. Don't let him have friends in high places who can get him off.

[19 : 58] Don't let him pay imaginative bribes that would see him walk free. No, verse 8, may his days be filled. May another take his place of leadership.

This man seems to be the ring leader of all the people going against David, and so his influence must be stopped. But even then, the language is still shocking.

I mean, verse 6, let someone evil be appointed. David, and of course, the especially strong language of verse 9 onwards. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow and so on.

Just what is going on? So we need to explore this further and make a few other pointers to make sense of why this prayer is such a strong prayer.

And one way to do that is to think about the characters here. Firstly, who is David? He's not just any random guy.

[21 : 04] He is the Lord's anointed. He's not just any king, but the chosen king, the mediator of God's kingship.

So an attack on this particular king is no less than an attack on the kingdom of God. Should the Davidic king fall? God's promises fall.

And God's very character is threatened because has he not promised that the line of the Davidic king will be everlasting and that he will bring about the good and blessed kingdom through David and his descendants?

So this is serious business. To go against this king is no less than treason against God and all the goodness he stands for.

But we don't just ask who David is. Secondly, we also ask who are the enemies? What are they like? Well, look at verse 16.

[22 : 11] These are not good people doing something uncharacteristic. No, these are evil people doing what comes to them naturally. They have never thought of doing a kind act.

They hound to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted. They take zero pleasure in blessing, but they love to curse.

In fact, the psalmist says, verses 18 and 19, that kind of sums up the clothes that they wear. The cloak that this enemy is wearing represents all the injustice and cursing he does.

It's like his uniform. Just as a cape defines Superman, so this cloak of evil and cursing defines him.

It's simply part of who he is. This is the scammer who thinks nothing of taking advantage of a grieving widow. This is the keyboard warrior who thinks nothing of spreading lies online about victims, doubling their trauma.

[23 : 20] This is the pastor who thinks nothing of using his position to get wealth and sexual favours from his congregants. And so David prays so strongly in part because of who he is and in part because of who his enemies are.

But that's not all. You see, when David calls down an imprecation on them, he isn't behaving like someone going to some bomo to ask them to make some voodoo door so that the person can be cursed in return.

Instead, what David is doing is going to the divine judge of the earth, the one whom he knows will act justly, and asking him to show proportionate justice.

To put it simply, he is upholding the principle of an eye for an eye that is enshrined in Old Testament law. A principle that prevents abuse by making sure that the punishment does not exceed what is fitting.

So, for example, if verse 2, the mouth of the wicked has opened against him, then, verse 6, it is only proportionate that a wicked man be appointed against the enemy.

[24 : 45] Let Hitler experience a Hitler, to put it another way. Or, verse 4, since they accuse him, then, verse 6 again, let an accuser stand at his right hand.

Or, since verse 16, this man never shows kindness, then, verse 12, let no one extend kindness to him. Or, verse 18, since he has clothed himself with cursing, then, verse 29, let these accusers be clothed with shame, and so on.

It is proportionate justice. But what about the rather harsh language in verses 13 to 15?

You know, we can understand if the perpetrator gets what he is to, but why go after the family? Well, here we need to engage in an exercise of empathetic imagination.

And, in fact, maybe as Asians, we might have a slight advantage over Westerners here in understanding this. You see, how does the Bible conceive of us as humans? We are not just blank canvas, which we can shape as we like.

[26 : 02] we are not just individuals on our own disconnected from all the people around us. Rather, all of us are also shaped by outside people and outside forces, whether that be our culture or our experiences, our teachers, and yes, certainly our family and tribe.

And the truth is, we tend to inherit our default convictions from our family and tribe. This was especially true in the days of old, when you can't just look up the internet or even travel to a different place for alternative viewpoints.

Now, that is not to deny individual moral responsibility. You just have to look up Ezekiel 18 to see that the Old Testament affirms that. And that is not to deny that people can change and have convictions that end up very different from their family and their tribe.

You just have to look at the example of Ruth, the Moabite, to see that. But we often take after our fathers. It is why the Pharisees understood exactly what Jesus was saying when he said they were not sons of Abraham, but sons of Satan.

He's saying as father and son, they share the same characteristics. And so the reason why David is in effect praying for the end of the family line is really his way of saying, Lord, may this evil stop here.

[27 : 42] May it not continue on through their sons and grandsons. I pray that you would draw a line and stop injustice after injustice from affecting future generations as new oppressors find new victims.

that's what David is praying for. It is really for the kingdom of darkness to finally end and God's kingdom of light to be established forever.

It is a big and ambitious prayer. And that brings us more briefly to our third section, the zealous motivation.

If David is not praying out of personal revenge, why does he pray this? Verse 21 tells us, But you, sovereign Lord, help me for your name's sake.

Or look down to verse 26, Save me according to your unfailing love. David prays not because he deserves it. He does not appeal to his own merit, his own accomplishments, or his own character.

[28 : 48] Rather, he appeals to God's character, God's very name. Do this, God, not because you are vindictive, but precisely because you are faithful.

You say what you do. You see, here is another thing to realize. When David prays, his prayer is footnoted with the very promises of God.

Think back to Genesis 12. What did God promise Abraham? To bless him so that from him, blessing will go out to all the earth.

That's what God committed himself to do through his covenant. But the flip side of that was also to curse those who curse him. That's exactly what these enemies are doing.

And so David is simply asking God to fulfill his promise, to bring about a curse on the persistently unrepentant. He's asking God to do this, verse 27, so that people will know God always follows through on his word.

[30 : 02] So that is the sum. But now comes the million-dollar question. How can we apply this? this is a prayer on David's lips, but can it be a prayer on our lips as well?

Can it be a song for our indignation? Well, we still have to do a bit of work. So let me suggest three things we need to keep in mind so that we might use Psalm 109 in an appropriate manner.

Firstly, start with the premise that we cannot pray Psalm 109 on our own. You see, it's easy to take the words of Psalm 109 and use it to justify my unhappiness with my neighbour or my colleague, isn't it?

That's what I did at the beginning of this sermon. But is Psalm 109 there simply to justify any instance of anger that I feel? Well, let us think through this carefully.

Who prays the words of this Psalm? It is the Lord's anointed king, isn't it? It is someone who is falsely accused.

[31 : 10] It is someone who is praying out of pure motives. It is someone who refuses to take personal revenge. And who alone perfectly fits that bill?

It is a nurse. It's Jesus. You see, by ourselves, we cannot pray this prayer because we are not innocent either. We have mixed and impure motives.

we pray not because we want to honour God's name but because we want revenge. And perhaps most damningly, we are sometimes more like the enemies described here.

We do not always show kindness to others. We ignore the poor and needy. Psalm 109 should be used against us. And so paradoxically, to apply Psalm 109 correctly, we actually need to say, by ourselves, we cannot pray Psalm 109.

We are not innocent. But Jesus can. And first and foremost, he applied it not by using it against us, but by taking Psalm 109 on himself.

[32 : 27] Look at verse 28 with me. While they curse, may you bless. May those who attack me be put to shame and may your servant rejoice.

Now, this is, of course, David's words, but do they not also point to a greater truth? You see, what happened to Jesus? He was falsely accused and mocked, yet he kept silent.

He didn't pray verse 1, although he was well within his rights to. Why? Because he was going to the cross to take the very curse we deserve.

And the great paradox is, as he was cursed, God was blessing at the same time. For Jesus was taking God's judgment for our sake.

And then the shame of the cross eventually became the shame of his enemies because the disgrace of the cross was transformed into the joy of the resurrection.

[33 : 30] There was a great reversal. And this leads to the second thing to keep in mind. We cannot praise Psalm 109 on our own.

However, when joined with Christ, this is indeed a song for our indignation. You see, having died and risen again, Jesus invites us now to trust him and be joined with him.

As we've been saying from Luke's gospel, that means the pattern of his life becomes the pattern of our lives too. And that means sometimes we will face the kind of suffering Jesus does.

Sometimes we, or at least the Christians we are praying for, might be in a similar position to the Davidic king. An innocent target of unrighteous words, even unprovoked violence, with no human avenue for justice.

Years ago, I was reading a book on the persecuted church, and the writer points out how a culture of persecution often develops. Usually there is some sort of power vacuum in the country which allows extremists to begin to be heard, and what they often do is then to create a lie, a false accusation that they bring against the Christian community.

[34 : 50] Now these are amplified so that they can stoke up a mob, and eventually Christians pay the price, with nowhere to go for help, because many times it is precisely these extremists who are now in power.

And in such life-eltering cases, not petty annoyances, there might be room to pray a Psalm 109-like prayer.

As the scholar John Day says, when the abuse of one's enemies have reached the extent that the honour and goodness of God are in question, that the name of God and the enduring faith of his people are at stake, then possibly such a prayer might be appropriate.

Now, we still need to take great care. This must be a prayer motivated by the purpose of worship. It might simply take the form of a cry to Jesus to return as judge, to end once and for all the family line of evil.

But it could also take the form of pleading with God to intervene right now, to stop his enemies from bringing more havoc and preventing the gospel from taking root.

[36 : 10] And that brings us to the third thing we must keep in mind. We must be indignant about injustice because God cares about injustice.

You see, Psalm 109 is a psalm that helps us not be naive about the world we live in. It is a psalm that recognizes that there is injustice, there is wickedness, there are hard hearts.

And when we hear of such injustice, especially when they don't affect us, sometimes we just respond with a shrug of the shoulders or polite smile.

What to do law is like that law. But God says those are inadequate. He certainly doesn't just give a shrug of the shoulders or a polite smile.

No, in the face of such injustice, God will most certainly do something about it. God cannot be mocked. as Galatians 6 verse 7 to 8 puts it, a man reaps what he sows.

[37 : 16] Sometimes we might complain that a psalm like Psalm 109 is unjust, but actually perhaps what really troubles us is that it is almost too just.

We think we are entitled to mercy, but the truth is justice means a man reaps what he sows. And so it is not necessarily wrong to pray for the wicked and unjust people everywhere in this way.

Now this doesn't mean that we cannot appeal to God's patience or pray for such people to repent. The rest of the Bible makes that clear. God doesn't owe us mercy, but he does want to show us mercy.

And yet the Bible makes clear there are people who absolutely do not want his mercy. Jesus himself caused this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. And so we can pray this way.

God, I don't know this person's heart. Only you do. And I plead for mercy, for repentance, but if their heart is truly hardened against you, then please may you judge justly.

[38 : 32] interestingly, did you know that part of this psalm is quoted in the New Testament? Verse 8 is quoted in Acts chapter 1 verse 20.

May another take his place of leadership. And who is Peter talking about at that point? Answer, Judas.

Peter is saying, at this point, Psalm 109 verse 8 is the only appropriate response to one who so opposed the work of Christ.

Both Peter and Judas betrayed Christ. Both are deserving of judgment. But Peter repented, whereas Judas did not. And if anyone remains the Judas, it is not inappropriate for Psalm 109 to be on our lips.

It is nothing less than simply asking God to act with justice. So let us not be afraid of Psalm 109. In fact, let it reassure us.

[39 : 39] Because if Psalm 109 is true, what does it mean? It means God does stand at the right hand of the needy. And he stands not like the accuser of verse 6.

No, he stands as the rescuer. If we confess ourselves to be poor and in need of Christ, he stands not in judgment, but in salvation.

And that's why David ends the psalm by praising God. Look at verses 30 to 31. With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord.

In the great throng of worshippers I will praise him, for he stands at the right hand of the needy to save their lives from those who would condemn them. This is our God, a God who cares about profound injustice and who gives us a song for righteous indignation in Christ.

Let's thank him for that today. Let's pray. Amen. Father, this is not a psalm that is easy to understand or a psalm that is easy to take to heart, but Father, I just pray, Lord, that your spirit has worked in us this morning to help us to understand this psalm rightly.

[41 : 04] I pray, Lord, that this psalm will continue to inform our minds, our hearts, our attitudes, that we might care about injustice, that we might be grateful that you have acted with mercy against us, and that will give us the strength to face the day of difficulty whenever there is opposition against us.

So, I pray now and commit all of us into your hands, pray that we would be changed by this psalm. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.