

The God Who Defends

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[0 : 0 0] are two very different readings, aren't they? Very contrasting. And I still remember it very clearly. It was about 20 years ago, probably more than that. And we were all seated on the floor in a Bible study group at someone's house. And we were looking at these very verses in Matthew's gospel, the one that Katie just read. I for an eye, two for two, but I tell you, do not resist an evil person. Turn the other cheek. If someone sues you and takes your shirt, hand them your coat as well. And on and on it goes. And even at that age, I was sort of quite an earnest Bible study leader. And I was sold on the fact that that's what Jesus wanted us to do all the time in every situation. But then there was this guy in this group, let's call him Michael, not our Michael, who kept objecting. And he said, no, no, no, no, it can't, no, it doesn't work.

And he even posed us a scenario. He said, what if my girlfriend was being verbally abused on the train? What am I supposed to do? What is she supposed to do? Turn the other cheek?

Is he just going to let it pass? Stand by? Just because this is what Jesus says? Now, you can see my dilemma as a Bible study leader, can't you? Because on the one hand, I agreed. It wasn't fair that this lady was being treated like she was. And really, someone should be standing up for her. But on the other hand, what are we going to do with Jesus' commands?

Well, I don't know what you think. I don't know whether you agree with Michael. But if we look at today's Psalm, it does appear that the Bible agrees with him to some extent, that there is a place for retaliation. Now, turn with me to Psalm 109 as we continue our series. And you might want to refer to the outline as well to help you along. But Psalm 109 is actually what is called an imprecatory psalm, a psalm with curses. And there are a number of those in the Bible, and all of them are challenging because it's hard to know what to do with them. And so as a consequence, many times people just skip them, overlook them. But if we believe that the whole Bible is God's Word, and it is, then we actually need to sit under the counsel of the full counsel of God, including difficult psalms like this one. So tempting as it was for me to just skip it and get to 110, we're going to actually look at it, and we're going to try and see if we can learn something from it. So let's dive into it. Now, the first five verses give us a real insight into the psalmist's plight. For not only is he being opposed by enemies, which is bad enough, he's actually being betrayed. It sort of takes attacks to a whole new level, doesn't it, when it comes to betrayal. And it calls into question our own judgment. That is, how could we have trusted someone who then turns around to betray us?

And so for the psalmist, it was deeply painful, as he writes, because these are people he loved. These are people he did good things for. And look what they've done in return.

[3 : 2 5] So verse 1, we read, Now, something quite specific is happening here, isn't it? Because the attacks that come from their mouths against me, they have spoken against me with lying tongues, with words of hatred, they surround me. They attack me without cause. In return for my friendship, they accuse me.

But I'm a man of prayer. They repay me evil for good and hatred for my friendship. Now, something quite specific is happening here, isn't it? Because the attacks that come from the accusers are mainly words. Open their mouths against him, spoken with lying tongues, words of hatred, accusing him. These all suggest attacks that are verbal. So perhaps they're maligning him or spreading false rumors about him, or maybe even bringing false charges against him in a court of law.

Whatever it is, though, what he wants from God is to counter with his own words, God's own words. And so he says, My God, whom I praise, do not remain silent. That is, God, speak up for me. Tell them the whole truth.

Tell the world what really happened. Now, this is a prayer to God, to someone whom the psalmist knows, understands the whole truth, and therefore can speak as the true judge on the matter.

And I'm sort of thankful, I guess, that I haven't really suffered betrayal to that extent. But as I think about it, I can imagine how someone might feel if they did.

[5 : 02] I mean, it probably happens to us on a milder scale, right? Less severe. And we feel the same way, don't we? When someone, we help, we go out of way to help, and then they turn around and they go and accuse us of meddling in their affairs.

Or we befriend someone, only to find out later on that they are criticizing us behind our backs. When things like that happen, we instinctively, I think, want to see justice done.

We want God to right the wrong, to have evil punished. And so that's what I think is happening here in verses 6 to 20 as we move on to the next section.

I've headed it up, justice, when wrongs need to be made right. Now, to me, these are the most challenging verses in the psalm because they seem to give us a license to utter curses when we're angry.

And there doesn't seem to be any hint of God's disapproval in them, is there? And so troubled are some people that what they've actually done is said, well, actually, these are not the words of the psalmist.

[6 : 04] They're actually the words of the accusers. And the accused, the innocent psalmist, is quoting them to show how hateful they are. Now, that's an interesting view. It's got some merit, I think.

I'm just going to give it some, give it a bit of consideration now. They say that this is the case because you can see a clear change in the tone in these verses at verse 6.

God is no longer being addressed, but He's spoken of in the third person. But what they also say and what they notice is that whereas in the first section it's the accusers in the plural, from these verses, verse 6 to verse 19, the person that is being cursed is in the singular.

It's just one person. So under this view, the single person is being accused by the accusers. He's the psalmist. Perhaps the scene here is a courtroom where the wicked bring their charges against Him and He has to defend Himself.

And so in verse 6, these accusers hope that someone evil is appointed as the advocate for the accused. Slightly different to the translation you've got there in the NIV, but I think that's a possible translation.

[7 : 17] So what we've got in that verse, verse 6, is that both lines of that verse have the same meaning because the second half says let an accuser stand at his side. And that's the usual position of an advocate.

And so then, from then on, all the other verses flowing up to verse 17 are curses that come from the lips of the wicked person or the wicked people. And it culminates in verse 17 with the following verses, the following words.

He loved curses. Let curses come on Him. That is, let all that we've just said come on Him. Now, it's a possible view, but I think at the end of the day, I'm not persuaded by it.

It's actually quite a popular view if you, and if you look at the NRSV, they actually put the words in they say at the start of verse 6. But I'm not persuaded and here are my two reasons. First, I'm not sure that the curses actually fit the accused.

That is, if this person is truly being victimized, this psalmist, through no fault of his own, then lines like verse 16 actually don't seem to fit because why would the wicked people even think to say he never thought of doing a kindness but haunted to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted.

[8 : 31] If you read it through, there's actually a strong sense of retribution, of justice being done. And I'm just not convinced that wicked people, deceitful people, would have that perspective. But secondly, and this for me, I think, is the clincher.

I don't think that's how we should read it because that's not how the apostle Peter reads this psalm. So some of you may recall in Acts chapter 1 and verse 20, Peter actually quotes from this psalm.

He quotes verse 8. It was the time after the ascension of Jesus. Jesus had just gone up to heaven and they needed, while they're waiting for the Holy Spirit to descend, they needed to replace Judas as one of the 12 and Judas was the traitor.

And Peter justifies their actions by quoting from verse 8. Let another take his leadership or position. And so Peter, and presumably the other Jews of the time, would have read these curses as truly applying to a wicked person, not someone who's wrongly accused.

And what's more, Peter had no qualms in actually carrying out the curse, as it were, carrying out verse 8. And so it's from there that I conclude that these verses, these curses, are actually from the mouth of the psalmist.

[9 : 42] directed against truly wicked people. I don't think, for instance, that the change from the plural to the singular is a problem. It's sort of like one person being singled out as a representative of the others.

So I think we can get over that. Now as we read these verses then, and we treat it as coming from the psalmist, I want you to notice firstly that there's actually no hint of the person or the psalmist acting on the curses.

Rather, his is a cry from a deep sense of injustice. His is a cry for justice. What he wants is for wrongs to be made right.

And if we look at the curses closely, I don't think he's being vengeful or vindictive at all. What he wants simply is retributive justice. That is, he wants to see his enemies suffer the same sort of things he himself is going through.

So it is the principle of an eye for an eye or to use a modern idiom to see that what goes around comes around. That everyone gets their just desserts.

[10 : 54] For when you read the curses, they sort of describe what the psalmist himself may be going through. So in verse 6, he thought that he had the accusers as his friends standing by him to defend him.

But instead, they turn out to be his accusers. And then if he's found guilty through a travesty of justice, then presumably his punishment would be quite severe, perhaps even a sentence of death.

In which case, if you read verse 9 and following, all these curses reflect what would happen to him and his family, which he now wants the accusers to experience as well.

His children will be fatherless, his wife a widow, because he's no longer there to provide for them. They'll be driven from their homes as wandering beggars. Then strangers will come and plunder the food of his labor, verse 11, and his children's children will be left destitute.

That's what he himself thinks will happen to his children if that's what happens to him. And then verse 15, he will never get a chance to clear his name, so his sins will remain forever.

[12 : 01] Remember, he's being accused and it would look as if he's being found guilty and his name will not be cleared. His good name will be blotted from the earth. And so for him, justice, I think, is to see his accusers experience the same thing, if nothing else, so that they realize the harm that is being done to him.

So I don't think this is indiscriminate vindictiveness. The curses are proportionate to his suffering. And if we read verses 17 to 19, if you look there, I think this is what he is expressing exactly.

For he says, he loved to pronounce a curse, that is my accuser, may it come back on him. He found no pleasure in blessing, may it be far from him. He wore cursing as his garment, it entered his body like water, his bones like oil, may it be like a cloak wrapped about him, like a belt tied forever around him.

And so I think when we read these curses, we are to take it as a reflection of his desire to see justice done. And so it's not a license for us to use these curses word for word on others.

And I think even though it might seem shocking, when we think about it, we all have this innate sense of justice. We may not use the exact words in these psalms, but we're wired to want to see wrongs being right.

[13 : 29] We want God to intervene. We want what goes around to come around for everyone to get their just desserts. You just have to look at three-year-olds when they're at playgroup or whatever, and you don't have to teach them, do you?

They know what's intrinsically fair and what's not fair. And when they're being unfairly treated, what do they do? They look to authority, to the teacher or whatever, to put things right, don't they?

Everyone has to have equal time on the swing. If one gets a treat, everyone needs to get a treat. My daughter, Lauren's favorite phrase at home is, what about me?

If Emma gets a treat, what about me? We want to see justice done. We want to be fair. And I think as adults, it's no different because as a society, we employ judges and cops to uphold the rule of law for us.

So imagine when a policeman like David, turns up at the scene of a car accident and a drunk driver has just killed a six-year-old girl sitting innocently by at the bus stop.

[14 : 39] Now we're not going to say to David, hey, go easy on the drunk driver, okay? He's only human. We're not going to say that, right? No, we want justice to be done. And I think that's all our gut reaction and particularly like even yesterday when we've witnessed the events in Paris, we want to see justice done.

Because if justice isn't done, and in the case of the girl's life, what we're saying essentially is that her life didn't matter. We're saying that the pain and the grief and the loss of the parents didn't matter if we don't insist on justice.

That all the potential that the girl had didn't matter. That's what we're saying when justice isn't done, isn't it? Now punishing the driver is not going to bring the girl back, no.

But we still want to see justice served. Because deep down we want to know that there is right and wrong in this world. And in particular we want the driver to know that, to realize the harm he's done, and perhaps be remorseful and turn from his ways.

Now as we come back to the psalm, I think the psalmist is even in a worse prospect than that because he's I think realizing that he's not going to get justice from humans, from the law of the land.

[16 : 00] And so in verse 20, what he does is then he pleads for divine intervention. And he says, may this be the Lord's payment to my accusers, to those who speak evil of me.

God, he prays, may my accuser and accusers get their justices. So maybe through the court system that might happen, but if not, he would want God to intervene so that the accusers get their just deserts.

But notice that even so, he's not taking the law into his own hands. No, even here he's leaving it to God. Now I don't know about you, but there's a problem with this, isn't there?

For us wanting to see God enforce justice. Because if everyone gets their just deserts, that includes us, doesn't it?

Includes me. And I get a bit nervous with that because I know that I haven't got my just deserts. I have been selfish before. I have cut down others with my words. I've lied.

[17 : 02] I've neglected the poor and the needy. I've done these things. And yet, I haven't got my just deserts. And if I were to get my just deserts from God, then I'll be a goner, wouldn't I?

And I think the psalmist realizes this too, because as we look at the third and final section, we see that as he appeals to God, he moves away from appealing to justice.

Rather, he asks God not to act because he's been good, but because of God's mercy. Notice he doesn't say, God saved me because I have been loving to my enemies.

He doesn't say that. Rather, in verse 21, he says, but you sovereign Lord, help me for your namesake. Out of the goodness of your love, your chesed, which we've been looking at over the past few weeks, deliver me, for I'm poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me.

I fade away like an evening shadow. I'm shaken off like a locust. My body is thin and gaunt. I'm an object of scorn to my accusers. And then he repeats himself again, help me, Lord my God, save me according to your unfailing love, your chesed.

[18 : 11] So the psalmist, you see, realizes his own helplessness, the fact that he cannot justify himself for he's poor, he's needy, he's wounded, he's thin, he's gaunt.

Yes, he still wants to see just retribution. So in verse 28 and 29, he wants to see those who attack him be put to shame and they be clothed with disgrace. But he knows that if justice alone was to be applied to him, then he wouldn't be saved either.

only if God is merciful will he be saved. Now you may then ask, how's that fair?

How is it fair that his enemies get their just desserts, but he, he doesn't. Instead he's saved by God's mercy. What difference is there? Well the one big difference is this, that the accused, unlike the accusers, recognizes that he's needy and poor.

God's and he realizes that this is the only sort of people that God saves. That's why in verse 31 he wraps up by saying, God stands at the right hand of the needy to save the lives of those, from those who would condemn them.

[19 : 29] It's an interesting contrast, isn't it? In verse 6, it was the accuser that is at his right hand. Now in verse 31, he asks for God to be at his right hand, to advocate for him, to save him.

Now how is a God of justice, remember in the second section we're saying God is a God of justice, how is a God of justice able to do that, advocate for guilty people like him? Well we'll find that answer in the New Testament only, because he's able to do that because of what Jesus has done by dying on the cross.

For by doing that, Jesus takes our just deserts for us. Instead of us taking the punishment for our wrong, Jesus takes it and put things right. That's how God, a God of justice, can continue to be a God of justice and still a God of mercy.

But I want to return to our scenario at the start, to Michael and his girlfriend. Was it right for him to stand up for the girlfriend?

Well, I think I have to admit that I was wrong as a young Bible study leader. I think it was right for him to stand up because there is a place for justice to be upheld.

[20 : 50] That's how we're created. And particularly when we see injustice done to others, like his girlfriend, and especially to the weak and the defenseless, then we ought to pursue justice on their behalf.

Because when we do that, we are, as it were, being God's agents. But then, in turning to Matthew chapter 5, I think when it comes to our own selves, that while we may still wish for justice to be served, we ought to do as the psalmist did, turn our indignation over to God and allow him to give others their just deserts, if that is his will.

There's nothing wrong with wanting justice to be done, even for us, but we need to leave it to God to execute. But better yet, if we turn to Jesus' teaching, if we have experienced the mercy of God, if we have received his grace through Jesus, what he's done for us on the cross, then we too should be merciful.

We too should be gracious to others, and therefore, turn the other cheek, love our enemies, and in so doing, we will be just like our Father in heaven, who showed us mercy, even though we deserve our justice deserts.

It is really heartbreaking to see all these bad news coming through on the news from overseas, and so it's sort of like, you know, every week, and we sort of tend to even lose track of what's happened.

[22 : 18] But I wonder if you recall, I think it was in January this year, the Charlestown shootings in the U.S. You remember that? Where there was a white man, Dylan Roof, I think, walked into a church when they were doing Bible study.

He even, I think, sat with them to do a study for a while, and he shot dead nine of the African-Americans in that church. One of the most moving scenes, and I don't know whether he caught it on the news, was when the families of the victims, the next day or the day after, confronted the accused in court, I think, by video hookup.

But one by one, all of them, victims, family of the victims, stood up and said that they chose to forgive him. They chose to forgive him even though I think every fiber in their moral being was crying out for justice.

But they showed mercy. They chose to forgive. They did also plead for the person to repent and escape God's judgment. But what they did was show mercy even as their Heavenly Father has shown mercy.

mercy. I'm not sure about you, but I haven't suffered to the same extent as they have. But if we too, like them, have experienced God's mercy, then surely we're called to forgive others as well.

[23 : 43] Those who hurt us, those who do us wrong, and those who betray us, betray our trust. You see, when we show mercy to others, people catch a glimpse of our Father.

God's mercy, and who knows, perhaps as they see our mercy, they might also see God's mercy, and turn to His Son to be saved.

So friends, to wrap up, God will see to it that justice is done. We can take comfort in that, even in relation to events like Paris yesterday. But we ourselves don't want to fall under God's justice.

Because if we want to stand out on our own merit, then all we've got is the certainty of God's severe judgment. Rather, in Christ, we have a better way. God has given it to us, not just for us, but for everyone, even our enemies.

And that way is mercy. So let us plead on God's mercy, let us turn to Christ, and then let us show mercy to others as well, so that they can see God's mercy through us, and then turn to Christ as well, and plead on God's mercy.

[24 : 57] It is challenging when everything in us says we want justice, but let's leave it in God's hand, and let's allow mercy to triumph or trump judgment.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for this psalm. We know the words are difficult, but it does give us a language, give us words to express our anger, to express our desire for justice, and we pray that Lord, we will use it in that manner.

And yet, Lord, help us to see that none of us are saved on the basis of justice alone, but rather we stand on what Jesus has done, and we plead for your mercy and your grace in order that we may be saved.

help us to so experience this grace and mercy that we have the grace to show it to others and extend mercy to others. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.