

The Shame for Plotters against God's People

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[0 : 0 0] Friends, if you've got the Bibles in front of you, do keep them open to the psalm that was just read, page 587. And that should be an outline as well inside the newsletter for you to follow along.

So over the next few weeks, throughout the month of January, including today, the last Sunday of December of the year, this is like change of pace, we're going to be looking at a few psalms in the Psalter.

We've been doing this over the last few summers already, so we're just tackling each one as they come, and some are more challenging than others, and tonight's is probably one of those.

Now, what are the circumstances that cause people to turn to God, whether individually or collectively? You may consider yourself when are the times when you're particularly seeking after God.

And certainly, I think in times of hardship and difficulty, even if you're not particularly religious, we instinctively reach out, don't we, to someone or something bigger than ourselves, more powerful, especially when we have come to the end of our resources.

[1 : 1 9] And so, that is, I think, the theme of many of the psalms that we're going to look at over this month of January, where I think the title, longing for God, expresses many of the sentiments in it.

Most of the psalms express a desire for God, a longing after Him, or a plea for help. And that's the case we have with today's psalm, Psalm 83, where, if you're listening on the opening verses, you'll probably catch it as well.

So, it says in verse 1, It's pretty clear, then, that here is a plea for help from the south.

Psalm 84, a cry to God not to stand idly by. And the presumption is that if God is God, He must see everything that is going on. And He is all-powerful, which He ought to be, is God.

Then, He cannot stand by idly, not speaking, nor acting, as it seems. Well, notice, firstly, that the plea is not for the psalmist himself.

[2 : 4 6] Instead, He's pleading on behalf of the nation of Israel, which is under threat. And Israel here is God's special possession.

And so, the psalmist sees that a direct attack on Israel is also an attack on God. Notice then that the psalmist talks about the foes, not only his foes or Israel's foes, but God's enemies and God's foes.

And so, we have to make a question, don't we? Why does God seem to stand aloof when His own reputation is at stake? Because surely, if Israel as a nation is no more, and her name is erased as a result, then God's own reputation would suffer as well.

Now, as we go on to verse 5, we have revealed who these enemies of Israel and of God are. So, we read, with one mind, they fought together, they formed an alliance against you, the tents of Edom and the Israelites of Moab and the Hebrides, Biblos, Ammon and Amalek, Philistia and the people of Tyre.

But even Assyria has joined them to reinforce Lot's descendants. So, these enemies are the nations around Israel, long-time foes since the time when Jacob's sons, the 12 tribes of Israel, possess the Promised Land.

[4 : 13] But whereas, in the past, Israel may have been fighting them individually, here they now come together in an alliance to plot with one mind. And they have a common goal, don't they?

To totally eradicate the nation of Israel. A list of Muslim enemies are actually those that are related to Israel. You might think of them as distant cousins, such as the Israelites and the Hagrites, which many believe are descended from Hagar, the slave girl who slept with Abraham when Sarah was unable to receive.

Likewise, the Edomites are descendants of Esau, Jacob's older brother. The Moabites, the Ammonites, are descended from Lot, who is Abraham's nephew.

And then these distant relatives are joined by the original inhabitants of Canaan, the Philistines and the Amalekites, and also by nations around Israel, like Tyre and Sidon, which are cities that are along the Mediterranean coast, north of Israel.

So numerous are Israel's many enemies, and even Assyria, far away in what is modern-day Iran, have come to reinforce or join this anti-Israel alliance.

[5 : 35] Now, some of you may be thinking and drawing parallels to the situation in modern-day Israel. That may be true, although I have to say Israel does have allies, though they have super-powered allies a lot further away.

But I think the Psalm, firstly, is to be focused on Israel on those days rather than today. I will talk a bit more about how the Psalm is applied today to whether to Israel or to something else.

So the next thing we want to consider, then, are the motivations for these nations. Why are they plotting against Israel? Was Israel herself being belligerent towards them?

Well, there's no indication in the Psalm that this is the case. Instead, I think if you go down to verse 12, you probably pick up that maybe these nations are motivated by envy. There is a comparison being drawn with the enemies of Israel in earlier times to fought against Israel in order to take possession of the pasture lands of God.

And so maybe this is the same motivation. Now, if so, then it seems that the enemies are angry with God's apparent favoritism of Israel.

[6 : 50] That, you know, God should give to Israel the best parts of Canaan, so-called pasture lands of God. And so the enemies are lashing out not just at Israel, but also at God for what He's doing to Israel.

It's often similar, I think, in families. Maybe, may or may not be your situation, but whenever there's sibling rivalry in the family, often we can point the finger at parents, can't we?

Showing favoritism to one particular sibling over another. And, for example, that was the case with Jacob during the time when he showed favor to Joseph.

And, of course, his brothers sent him into Egypt, sent him to slavery in Egypt in the world of Genesis. But, of course, that's not what's going on here because God, yes, did choose Israel and set it apart from the nations, but it was not simply to just bless Israel and no one else.

Rather, the aim was to use Abraham and his offspring to be a blessing to the world. God would teach Israel his ways, raise them up to be a moral nation so that they can, in turn, draw the other nations to God.

[8 : 12] And so, if these other nations wanted to be blessed by God, they could by coming under submission to Israel.

In fact, there was a sort of inkling of this when, during the time of King David, some of the nations did come under his rule and enjoyed some blessing under him.

But, what has happened now is that these nations, these same nations, decide to go down a different path. One that actually sought the blessings of God but without having to submit to him.

And so, the psalmist now wants God to punish them just as he did, God did, during the time of the judges when they came against Israel. So, that's the third section which we get into now, verse 9.

And we read, do to them as you did to Midian, as you did to Sisera and Jabin and the river Kishon, who perished at Endor and became like dung on the ground. Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeb, all their princes like Zeba and Zalmanah, who said, let us take possession of the pasture lands of God.

[9 : 28] Now, these verses here actually describe two specific incidents that occurred during the time of the judges. So, if you go to the book of Judges in chapter 4, when Deborah was judged, God defeated Jabin, the king of Canaan, and then his commander as well in Sisera.

And some of you will know Sisera if you read how he was killed by the woman Jael with the ten peg as her weapon. It's a gruesome reading, I'm not going to get into details now, but if you're interested, go check it out in chapter 4.

The other incident is when Gideon was judged. So, a few chapters later in chapter 7 and 8 of Judges, during that time, Gideon and the nation of Israel, primarily, initially, through the tribe of Ephraim, first killed the leaders of Midian, Oreb and Zeb.

So, these are like the commanders. And then soon after, followed later by defeating the kings of Midian, Zeba and Zalmanah, Amunah. Now, in both of these incidents, when their leaders were defeated, these nations also ceased to oppress the people of God.

And that's often the case, isn't it? That it's not really the people themselves that are opposed to Israel, but the proud rulers who seek to oppress the nation.

[10 : 54] And interestingly, with the time of Gideon, that incident there, Israel, we are told in Judges chapter 7, wasn't just opposed by Midian, but also by other nations, which are actually listed in this psalm.

It was described that the Amalekites of Amalek, in other words, were opposed to Israel, but also what is referred in Judges as other eastern peoples, meaning those that were living east of Israel.

And we know by geography, looking at the geography, that the Moabites and the Ammonites were these eastern peoples, or people that lived east of Israel. And so you can see then, therefore, that there is a correspondence, isn't it, between the nations that are opposing Israel here in Psalm 83 and those that were doing it in the time of the Judges.

In fact, in the time of the Judges, or in particular in chapter 7, when the Israelites were oppressed by Median, they were actually forced, we read, into the caves in the mountains because the pasture where they grew their crops was being overrun and ruined by these invaders.

And so again, we see the pasture lands of God being the focus or the target of these enemies.

[12 : 21] Now, when this psalmist then pleads for God's intervention, he's quite specific in prescribing the punishments that he would like to see occur.

And that's what we read in verse 13. And so he prays, Make them like tumbleweed, my God, like chaff before the wind. As fire consumes the forest or a flame sets the mountains ablaze, so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your storm.

These are, of course, imagery that the psalmist is using, but I think what he wants to see is Israel's enemies being brought low, taken down a level or two from their pride.

He wants to dislodge their rulers in particular from their seemingly secure and lofty position to then be tossed about like chaff and tumbleweed in the wilderness and then to feel the fiery anger of God like the sun in the desert.

Perhaps, too, he's asking for the leaders of these nations to be deposed so that the result is that the people themselves become directionless because they don't have a leader anymore, so they become like tumbleweeds, blown about without any specific direction in the wilderness.

[13 : 35] the end result, the end result, though, is that they will be ashamed, that's what he asked for, for what they've done to Israel. For we read, cover their faces with shame, Lord, is the prayer, so that they will seek your name.

May they ever be ashamed and dismayed. May they perish in disgrace. Let them know that you, whose name is the Lord, that you alone are the most high over all the earth.

Now, these are pretty strong prayers, and we're going to go a little bit further on as to whether we should be using words like this. But the first thing to notice with this last few verses is that although it may seem like that's what the psalmist is praying for, he's actually not looking for the total destruction of his enemies.

Rather, he desires for them to be ashamed and dismayed, that is, humbled, not so that he can then gloat over them or take pleasure in their demise, but actually the result is that he would like them, the enemies, to acknowledge who God is, that they might seek your name, it says, or, further on, know that you, that you alone are the most high over all the earth.

That is ultimately his aim. And, you see, if the God of Israel is the most high, then ultimately the psalmist wants all nations to be brought to the point where they seek his name.

[15 : 08] And they know that he alone is the one that rules over all the nations. And so, in that sense, we see that the psalmist is returning to the concern at the start, isn't it?

God's reputation. Is he also concerned that Israel will find relief from the enemies? Yeah, of course, in part. But if the psalmist is just purely being vindictive, he would not be seeking the enemy's repentance.

He would want them to be totally eradicated, totally destroyed. Now, the other thing to note as well is that the psalmist is not demanding that God help Israel because they deserve it.

Rather, he knows that God has chosen them graciously, but with the job, with the role of being witnesses to God's name. And so, when God rescues Israel, what the psalmist is desiring by that act is then that Israel herself then can glorify God through that rescue, that his name might be known and magnified because God has rescued them.

So, that's the psalm in a nutshell. And what I wanted to do was explain the psalm, but then turn to how we might apply this psalm today. It's one thing to understand it.

[16 : 32] It's one thing to also know what it meant for Israel at the time, but what relevance does it have for us today as Christians? Is it okay to pray such prayers still?

For example, to ask God to bring shame and dismay to our enemies? It's very tempting, isn't it, if we could, particularly when we are being faced with a lot of opposition?

After all, as Christians, we have a direct line to God, don't we? We'll promise that if we bring our requests to God in prayer, that He will hear us.

Well, that is true. God does hear our prayers, but we also need to be careful with our motives because even though we have a direct line and relationship with God, God's aim, just like He did for choosing Israel, is to draw us near to Him in order to change our hearts and our motives so that we align with God's will and plan.

It's not the other way around. We are called to serve God. God is not being, God did not choose us to do our bidding or to give strength to our selfish motives.

[17 : 47] And so I think we need to be careful how we use this psalm. For example, I've heard from time to time, you know, leaders of nations, I think in particular the U.S., I'm not trying to pick them out, but, you know, I've heard their leaders claim that because they're a Christian nation, that therefore God must be on their side.

And then they use God's name to pursue their own political purposes, particularly in global politics. Well, as the psalmist says, God alone is the most high, and that means he rules over all.

He's not beholden to any single nation. And I think that also applies to the modern-day Israel, which is a political entity, rather than the people of God as described here in Psalms.

And yet, now that Jesus has come, I think we can apply this psalm in light of Jesus. Because Jesus, as we know, is the true Israel.

He is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises regarding Israel, including this one here. So, for example, when we consider verse 4, and the psalmist prays against the plot to destroy Israel as a nation so that Israel's name is remembered no more, well, we can apply that fact to Jesus and think about Jesus' own name being remembered.

[19 : 27] And indeed, during the time of Jesus himself, there were many who plotted against Jesus, wasn't there? Those who sought to kill him, to dispose of him, so that his name is remembered no more.

And since that time, we, the church, that is the body of Christ, we bear the name of Jesus. And we too, not we as in here, right here in Doncaster, but we, the church around the world, across time, we have been subjected to persecution from time to time too, where the enemies have sought to eradicate the church so that the name of Jesus is remembered no more.

So I think this psalm is not primarily to be used for us as individuals when we suffer personal hurts.

Instead, this psalm has been given to us as Christians so that we can apply it collectively as the people of God throughout the world when we are standing up for the name of Jesus.

When we see, for example, that there are disciples of Jesus in other countries being persecuted or threatened or mocked because of their faith, then the words of this psalm, the sentiments and the thrust of this psalm can be used to encourage us in how we respond and pray.

[20 : 51] Well, if those situations occur, then the next question to ask, is it okay to pray as the psalmist does, to seek for our enemies to be defeated, whoever they might be, for them to be covered in shame?

Shall we call on God not to be silent or aloof in light of those events? Well, before I answer that question directly, I want us to remember firstly that in the case of Jesus' own life, God has actually acted and spoken decisively.

And that actually, in Jesus, God has acted and spoken decisively in response to this psalm. Because you see, God has not turned a blind eye to evil.

He has not remained silent, but rather he sent Jesus as the answer to all those things. And all the plots against Jesus, we realise, has actually failed, despite the many attempts to bring him down.

Why? Because even though Jesus' enemies succeeded in killing him, his death on the cross was anything but a failure, wasn't it? It was actually a great success because it was actually part of God's plan.

[22 : 14] God's plan was that Jesus would die so that he could save and rescue his people in answer to the prayer in the psalm. For all who put our trust in him, we have our sins forgiven, we have eternal life assured, God's people are rescued, have been rescued because of Jesus' death.

And so God has answered by saying, I have succeeded and I have foiled the plots of all evil doers because of what Jesus has done.

But secondly, the plot to kill Jesus also failed because God raised Jesus from the dead. That is, Jesus is alive despite the attempts to kill him. the empty tomb on Easter Sunday is actually God speaking loudly through all eternity saying, in Jesus I have conquered.

And henceforth, because Jesus has been raised from the dead, his name will be remembered forever. There is no chance that his name will be eradicated from the pages of history or from our consciousness Jesus.

Because he lives forever at the right hand of his father. He is ruling right now as the king of kings. Jesus' victory is secure. Nothing can defeat him now.

[23 : 42] And nothing can defeat his mission. Which means that if we are disciples of Jesus, we too have that victory, secure. We may be persecuted, the church may be persecuted for their faith, for our faith.

we may suffer and even die, but our destiny is assured. Nothing can take that away from God's people anymore. So in one sense, when we look at the psalm there, we don't need to plead like the psalmist does and ask God to act or not be silent.

Because God has acted, he has answered, he has spoken, and we can rest in his answer. The answer is Jesus. And he has rescued us.

He has rescued all of God's people. And so we can take great comfort in that, whatever our circumstances in life, whatever the attacks that we may experience as God's church, even as we bear witness to him.

But even though I think we can do that, and there's great comfort in knowing this victory, I know that for us, it doesn't take away the fact that when the insults and the threats come, they still hurt, don't they?

[24 : 56] And so in that sense, we can also still look at this psalm as encouragement to how we respond when these things occur, because I think we can still pray for the humbling of those who plot against God's people.

Or, as the title of the sermon says today, we can pray that shame may come against the plotters of God's people. Or maybe we wouldn't pray that they turn into chaff or tumbleweed, but we can petition, can't we, that they may be covered in shame, so that they may seek God's face and turn to Christ.

Now, I think many of you think, wow, that's a pretty strong kind of prayer, but the word shame here is not about wishing them total humiliation, temptation, but rather, as I've said before, the idea of shame here is that of being humbled, to be brought low, to be ashamed of their wrongdoing.

Why? So that then it prompts repentance and seeking after God, turning back to Him. You know, in a sense, that's something that we've all had to do, isn't it?

If we are to become followers of Jesus, we have had to be ashamed of our past, what we've done wrong against God, and turn to Christ.

[26 : 21] And so, in a sense, it is not a bad thing to pray, isn't it, for God's enemies, for anyone really, to be shameful or ashamed so that they will then turn to Christ.

Now, the other thing to notice too is that when the psalmist prays, what he does is actually he's entrusting the outcome to God rather than taking action for himself.

That is, rather than putting justice into his own hands, he's asking God to be the one to mete out justice to evildoers. And that's the same for us today too as Christians.

That's why I chose the other reading in Romans 12 17 where Paul said, do not repay evil with evil. And then he adds in verse 19, do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath.

For it's written, it is mine to avenge, I will repay. On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he's thirsty, give him something to drink, and in doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.

[27 : 29] And if you're not familiar with the idea of heaping coals on your head, that was a sign in those days of repentance, an act of being ashamed of what you've done.

And so Paul here is quoting from a proverb to encourage us that even as we are praying for our enemies, we do good to them and not retaliate. We repay evil with kindness so that God can use that kindness to prompt those who hurt us to repentance.

You know, often, and I know how strongly we can all feel about this because I feel the same, when others hurt and mock us, we feel right that they ought to be punished. We want to fight back, and even if we don't fight back, we wish on them to experience exactly what we've had to go through.

But as we reflect on this psalm, I think the focus, ultimately, is not that, but rather that God's name be glorified and his son worship. That is, we want our enemies to repent, not to make us feel good, but so that they will turn to God.

And that as they do, they become our brothers and sisters in Christ, and together with us, as Christ's body, share in his blessings.

[28 : 52] How do you feel when someone who has hurt you, all of a sudden, when they repent, not only are they not punished for it, but they get the same blessing.

things that you do. We shouldn't be thinking, you know, you hurt me so much, I hope you rot in hell. But rather, what God is saying of us is that we should be praying and be given that heart to say, even though you hurt me, I desire your repentance so that you may be blessed in Christ, just as I am.

Let us rejoice that they are sharing with us in God's blessings. Why? Because we too have experienced that same thing, isn't it?

That instead of being punished for our wrongdoing, we are forgiven because we put our faith in Jesus. And so if you think that they deserve to be punished, well, just pause for a moment and consider what makes you exempt from punishment for your own wrongdoing.

Because if Jesus took your punishment for you, then he can for them as well. You see, God will always be just.

[30 : 13] He's not going to be silent in the face of evil or injustice, but there is really one of two ways in which justice will be served.

It has already been served in Christ, dying for our sins, and so if we put our trust in him, God's justice is fulfilled in the death of Jesus.

But if we fail to repent, then well, God's justice will occur on the last day when every wrong deed will be punished. And only those who acknowledge the name of Jesus and come under his rule will be forgiven.

So that should really be our desire, isn't it? Not only for us, but also for those who hurt us, for those who hurt the church, that God may change all of our hearts so that we are ashamed of our wrong doing, and then turn to God, seek his face, acknowledge him, and worship his son.

Let's pray that God will do that to us and to all who seek evil against God's church. Father, we know that you've not been silent in the face of evil, that you've acted, you've spoken in your son.

[31 : 39] We thank you that he has come to rescue us so that we may be blessed, we may be forgiven, that we're not punished. Father, we pray for those who resist your son, that they may be ashamed.

Show them your mighty work on the cross, so that they might turn, seek your face, repent, and glorify your name. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.