

Psalms for the Summertime: Psalm 58

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 58

As I've mentioned before, the sermons at the end of this series were chosen because they come from different kinds of psalms that form us in different ways. When we pray these psalms, when we study these psalms, the Holy Spirit uses each of them to form different parts of our life. Each of these psalms are distinct tools in the Spirit's hands, used to give our lives a godly shape.

Today the Holy Spirit will use Psalm 58 to form us. And as a way to get into that let's imagine that we're reading this psalm as devotions at the end of a family meal. You've had a lovely dinner with pleasant conversation. You had some yummy lasagna finished off with homemade apple pie and vanilla ice cream, even yummiier. Everyone's in a good mood, and now for closing devotions you open up your Bible and read this psalm.

That would be an interesting way to end a meal, wouldn't it? That would be a shock to the system. It would definitely get people's attention. Psalm 58 is a psalm that feels out of place with polite, West-Michigan nice society. It expresses feelings of extreme anger. It hopes for violence. It expresses something close to hate. When we do our devotions, those aren't generally the feelings we're trying to cultivate. "Break the teeth in their mouths, Lord." "When we dip our feet in the blood of our enemies, we will rejoice." What is the Holy Spirit forming in us with words like these?

The question becomes sharper when you realize that Psalm 58 is not the only psalm which speaks this way. Psalm 58 is part of a class of psalms called imprecatory psalms. An imprecation is like a curse, a wish for harm, and these psalms are imprecatory in the sense that they wish harm for our enemies. There are a number of these psalms in the Psalter, all of them wishing destruction and death. Psalm 3: "Lord Break the teeth of the wicked!" Psalm 55: "May death take my enemies by surprise! Let them go down alive to the realm of the dead." Psalm 69: "May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see! May they be blotted out from the book of life!" Psalm 109 doesn't just wish bad things upon the enemy, but on the enemy's children: "May their children be wandering beggars...may no one pity them." And finally Psalm 137: "Daughter of Babylon, happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them on the rocks."

There's more where that came from. If you've ever honestly sat down and read through the psalms and studied them, you know that already, because you can't miss these verses and they are unforgettable. If you haven't actually made a personal effort to study the psalms, if you just encounter them when preachers preach on them or when other people read them for devotions, you might not know these phrases, because preachers and devotion leaders steer away from these hard words and towards friendlier psalms like 23, or 46 or 100.

So, why did the Holy Spirit want to put so many of these difficult psalms in the Psalter? How can these angry poems form us for goodness? I think the answer to that question begins with that observation we've made multiple times in this series: the psalms cover the full range of human emotions. All the feels that you can feel are in the psalms. John Calvin put it well when he called the psalms "an anatomy of the parts of the soul." "There is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn ... all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities... with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated."

The imprecatory psalms are in the Psalter because, like it or not, they deal with an emotion with which our mind is 'wont to be agitated.' And that emotion is anger; sharp anger at a person who has hurt us or a person we love. Violent anger at a person who has done damage to the peace and happiness of our world. We all get angry. We all get angry at people. It happens all the time. It happens every day. Sometimes the anger is smaller. A car runs a red light in front of us – comes through three seconds after the light has turned! - and you think, man I wish there was a cop there to nail that guy. Sometimes the anger is large. Your child is bullied repeatedly at school, by the same kid, and the parents of that kid just laugh it off like it's no big deal. You find yourself thinking dark thoughts towards that family, and sometimes those thoughts are violent. Everyday stuff happens that makes us angry.

And that's not a bad thing. Anger is not necessarily sinful. God gets angry at sin and injustice. God has wrath. The Bible is very clear about that. But anger is also really dangerous. Anger is one of the seven deadly sins. In Colossians, Paul tells us to rid ourselves of anger, rage and malice. One of the daily challenges of life, one of the central moral and spiritual challenges facing every human being is: how do you handle your anger? In your marriage, in your friendships, in your family, in your work, in your neighborhood, in the public square, how do you keep your proper angry feelings from becoming a deadly sin?

People offer different answers to this very important question. There are many who would have you use your anger as a source of power. Remember what that person said. Remember what those people did. Remember, and let your anger empower you, let it become a fire that burns in you, let it drive you until you get justice. This approach gets certain things right. It takes sin seriously. It takes injustice seriously. It recognizes that we people need to act against sin and injustice, which is definitely something God calls us to do.

But overall, this is not the approach God wants us to take with our anger. This is not the Biblical approach. Nurturing your anger, holding onto it, meditating on it is precisely the habit that turns anger from a godly emotion into a deadly sin. It leads to all sorts of dark stuff. Instead of being a person who is angry, you become an angry person. Meditating on your anger can lead to a victim mindset, the thing that those people did to you becomes the center of your identity and the source of your power. So instead of the defining story of your life being the good and hopeful story of what God has done for you in Jesus, the defining story of your life the animating story of your life is what that person, those people did, what those people are doing. As Christians, injustice and evil should never be ignored, but it can never become our defining story, our animating spirit.

Why would you ever want to let anger become your defining story? Because anger is a source of power. It makes you feel alive. It fills you with a sense of righteous purpose. Anger can get things done. I remember hearing a professional athlete talking on ESPN radio once. He was a football player who had a distinguished career, and he talked about how he used anger as the power for his success. He took negative comments that people said about him as his motivation. His anger over these slights were his fuel. Specifically, he mentioned how in sixth grade – sixth grade – when he said he wanted to be a professional football player, one of his teachers warned him that only a very small percentage of athletes ever become professional, so maybe he should consider other careers. That seems like a sensible thing to say. But this man said he took that word and used it as fuel. He let himself be offended by it. He let it be a grievance and he nurtured the grievance. As he played and as he practiced, as he tackled his opponents and as he built up his body, he thought about what she said and dreamed of shoving it in her face. Even after enjoying a professional career and having success, you could hear the anger, the resentment, the outrage in his voice. You could feel the heat of the fire he's been stoking his whole life.

Did the anger give him power? Yes, it did, but at what cost. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world and yet lose his soul. To quote Jesus in the sermon on the mount, "If the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness."

For all young Christian athletes here and for all coaches, there is a style of coaching and motivation that uses anger and negative motivation to fuel the energy of the team. It can get results, but I'm not sure it's an appropriate tool for a Christian coach. When you use negative motivational tactics, when you teach the kids how to use their anger as a motivational power, you are training them in resentment. You are training them in dark power. You are teaching them bad spiritual habits. For Tolkien fans, it's like the One Ring. It gives you temporary power over your enemies, but eventually it consumes your soul.

If that's not the godly way to deal with your anger, what is the godly way to handle it, and how might the expression of anger in this psalm help us find the path? I want to spend the rest of this sermon exploring that.

First, for all their difficulty, these imprecatory psalms are honest about the reality of our anger. They don't bury anger under a suffocating blanket of West Michigan nice; they acknowledge the reality of our anger, of our hurt and they give us a formal way to express it

Second, the presence of these psalms in the Psalter acknowledges that anger isn't necessarily bad. In fact, if handled in the right way, if we take it down the right path, our anger is good. God wants us to be angry

at bad things. Eugene Peterson goes so far as to say that in a world of radical evil, sharp anger is often the first sign that we care.

Third, and this is a point where God's way diverges from the way I just talked about, the imprecatory psalms train us to take our hot feelings of anger to God. All the imprecatory psalms make this move: they fully express the anger they feel – even when that anger is dark and vengeful – but as they express it they give it to God.

Specifically, they give over to God both the remembering of the injustice and the action to avenge it. In Psalm 137 the psalmist says, “Lord remember what those people did to us!” and in so doing he begins to offload his need to fixate on the thing that his enemies did to him. He will never forget the injustice, but he won't need to fan his memory into a fire of rage. In Psalm 58 he also gives over to God the need to get vengeance for his hurt. “Lord you break the teeth of the wicked. You take the fangs from their mouth!” In the human way of doing things we call ourselves and our tribe to remember our grievances so that we can act to avenge the injustice.

In the imprecatory psalms way of doing things, we call on God to remember our grievances so that God can avenge the injustice. In the words of Romans 12, we leave room for God's wrath. We acknowledge that God has said ‘vengeance is mine.’ And then, having given over our wrath to God, we give up our need for revenge and we rest ourselves in the certainty that God will judge the wicked and set things straight. That's where the psalmist ends up in verse 11: The righteous will be OK, because there is a God who judges the earth.

You see, God is way better at anger than we are. You sometimes hear Christians justify their anger and their expression of it by pointing to the story of Jesus cleansing the temple. “Hey, I'm allowed to express my anger and turn over a few tables once in a while because that's what Jesus did!” Well, yes and no. Jesus is way better at anger than you and me. I have a lot of confidence in Jesus' ability to work out his anger properly. I have a lot less confidence in our ability to work out our anger properly. Our anger should lead to action, but it must always leave room for God's wrath and, in their own way, the imprecatory psalms teach us to do that.

Fourth and finally, the imprecatory psalms only start us down the path of handling our anger. They are a beginning. They teach us to give our anger and our need for vengeance over to God, but as we follow the story further down the road we get more context for these difficult psalms. The rest of the Biblical story shows us how God answers these angry prayers.

The psalmist shouts this angry prayer to God, and what does God do with their prayer? How does God answer? The psalmist of 137 calls for the children of Babylon to be dashed against the rocks, but who is the child who gets dashed against the rocks of the world's sin? It's God's own Son. It's Jesus. The psalmist of Psalm 58 looks forward to bathing his feet in the blood of the wicked. But whose blood ends up flowing? Whose feet are bathed in blood? Jesus' feet. “See from his head, his hands, his feet, sorrow and love flow mingled down.”

So it's not the blood of our enemies that we bathe in; it's his blood. And when we bathe in his blood it's our sins that are being dealt with, it's our sins that are being paid for, it's our sins that are washed away. We have been washed in the blood of the lamb and it is our salvation. The imprecatory prayers call for the destruction of God's enemies, but at the cross we find out that we are enemies too. Romans 5:10: “while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son.” We were God's enemies. All those prayers for God to take action against God's enemies end up pointing at us too. And God does take action, he comes and he dies for us, and as he dies, instead of calling down an imprecation on those who crucify him, he says, “Father forgive them; they don't know what they're doing.” The journey of how to handle our anger starts with the imprecatory psalms, but it ends here in this place where we recognize our own guilt and receive a grace upon grace upon grace.

There will be more stuff to make us angry this week. And there will be sins and injustices that will call for our action. May all our angers and all our actions take place in the light of the grace and power of Christ's cross.

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