

July 10, 2011
First Baptist Vancouver

Text: Psalm 109
Title: “Praying Our Hate”
(Series: Praying the Psalms in the City)

“Most of Scripture speaks to us ... the Psalms speak for us.” That is how the leading theologian of the 3rd century, Anthanasius of Alexandria, expresses the blessing the Psalms are for the people of God. Most of Scripture speaks to us about the Living God the Psalms speak for us to the Living God. They give us the words and images with which to express the movements of our hearts before the redeemer of our hearts.

The Psalm we will pray today initially grates at our civilized sensibilities. As we read it this morning many of its phrases will offend us. But this Psalm, and others like it, model just the kind of praying many in our city need to be freed to pray, especially, but not only, as we continue to process what happened in the Stanley Cup riot of June 15th.

Psalm 109. “For the choir director. A Psalm of David.”

- 1 O God, whom I praise,
do not remain silent,
- 2 for wicked and deceitful men
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 an evil man to oppose him;
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 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 cut off the memory of them 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, O Sovereign LORD,
deal well with 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, O LORD my God;
save me in accordance with your love.
- 27 Let them know that it is your hand,
that you, O LORD, have done it.
- 28 They may curse, but you will bless;
when they attack they will be put to shame,
but your servant will rejoice.
- 29 My accusers will 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 I will praise him.
- 31 For he stands at the right hand of the needy one,
to save his life from those who condemn him.

This Psalm speaks for us? This Psalm trains us to pray in a way that pleases the Living God? We can pray this Psalm to the God we meet in Jesus of Nazareth?

I can see my self praying verse 30 – “With my mouth I will greatly extol the LORD; in the great throng I will praise Him.” I have a little more trouble with verse 1 – “O God, whom I praise, do not remain silent.” What a way to begin a prayer: “Wake up God!” It feels slightly audacious, like giving orders to the Almighty. But I can grow into that. It is how it often feels. “God, are You listening? Wake up. I need You to pay attention.” So I do not have any serious qualm with being trained to pray in this way.

BUT, pray verse 7 – “When he [the one who has spoken ill of me] it tried, let him be found guilty.” Pray verse 8? – “May his days be few; may another take his place leadership.” Pray verses 9 & 10 – “May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes.” What if one of the worship leaders here at First prayed like that in the morning prayer? “O God, may the enemies of the church become homeless beggars.” It offends every fiber of our civilized souls! Verse 12 – “May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children.” Verse 14 – “May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD; May the sin of his mother never be blotted out.” Exact opposite of the spirit of the Psalm we prayed last Sunday, Psalm 51.

The trouble is Psalm 109 is not the only Psalm that prays this way! We encounter this kind of praying early in the Prayer Book, in Psalm 5, verse 10 – “Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own councils; because of their many transgressions, cast them out.” We meet it again in Psalm 10, verse 15 – “Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer.” The examples pile up. Until passing through 109 we come to 137, a Psalm that has long embarrassed the church. Speaking against Babylon, the devastator of Judah, the Psalmist sings, verses 8 and 9 – “Happy shall be the one who requites you with what you have done to us! Happy shall be the one who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” No attempt to be polite or “spiritual.” Right out there: raw anger and desire for vengeance.

What highlights the problem is that in a number of places in the Old Testament the people of God are called away from just such a spirit.

- Leviticus 19, verses 17-18 – “You shall not hate your brother in your heart ... you shall not avenge or bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
- Exodus 23, verses 4-5 – “If you find your enemy’s ox or his donkey wandering away, you shall surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its load, you shall refrain from leaving it to him, you shall surely release it from him.”
- Proverbs 24, verse 17 – “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, And do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles.”
- Proverbs 25:21 – “... if you enemy is hungry, give him bread.”

Psalm 109 helps us pray? This kind of praying speaks **for** us? For **us**? This kind of praying trains us for authentic communication with the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Who so loves the world that He gives His Life on the cross for His enemies? This kind of praying is appropriate for disciples of the Prince of Peace? This kind of praying is appropriate for the new humanity being brought into being by Jesus Christ? The new humanity we have been learning about in Paul's letter to the Ephesians? For the new humanity shaped by Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom? By saying like, "love your enemies," "bless those who curse you," "pray for those who persecute you"?

WHAT are we do with Psalms like 109? Edit them out of the Book?

I submit to you that Psalms like these are not only appropriate for us to pray...they liberate to us to pray authentically. And I submit that Psalms like these consequently liberate us to actually obey Jesus' radical command to love enemies. And I submit that the church's aversion to praying Psalms like these is one more indication that we tend to play games with our souls.

Let me explain. I have four points; moving from the more general to the more specific.

1. First, a basic conviction of the Psalmists is that all of life is to be brought into relationship with the Living God. The authors of the poems leave nothing out. They speak their joy and praise, AND their sorrow and complaints. They offer their victories, their defeats, their love, their hate. The Psalmists do not leave "real life" at the doorstep of the Temple when they come to worship. They bring in the whole lot! The whole complex lot!

Maybe you have heard someone leading worship pray something like this: "O God, we now come to You, setting aside everything we were thinking and feeling before we came and everything we are concerned about after we leave." NO! shout the Psalmists. NO, NO, NO. Instead they pray something like this: "O God, here we are. We bring it all. Because 'it all' is who we are."

This explains why the Psalms are not assembled in some nice, neat order. I have been praying through the Psalms nearly everyday for 22 years. Over the years I have tried to find some clear order to the way they are arranged in the Book. I have yet to see any systematic pattern. The Psalms are gathered into Five books. Surely those who arranged the prayers into Five books has some scheme in mind. Right? Maybe. But it is not yet clear to me.

Which is just the point the whole Book is making. Life does not happen in a nice, neat, systematic order. Right? We just get one part of our lives in order when another falls apart. We get one relationship restored when another goes sour. We finally get all the bills paid off when the plumbing goes. Life does not happen in any predictable order. So why should we expect that the Book that trains us to pray to be any different? Phillip

Yancey writes: “Taken together, the 150 psalms are as difficult, disordered, and messy as life itself. Oddly, that fact gives me great comfort.”

Thus we find the juxtaposing of what I call “up-Psalms” and “down-Psalms.” Or as Walter Brueggemann suggests, Psalms of orientation and disorientation. So we have Up-Psalm 23 – “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Preceded by down-Psalm 22 – “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Up-Psalm 103 begins – “Bless the Lord, o my soul; and all that is within me bless His holy name.” Preceded by Psalm 102 – “Hear my prayer, O LORD! Let my cry for help come to You.” As we pray through the Book we go up and down, in and out, right and left, because that is how life is.

AND the Psalmist bring it all into relationship with the Living God. Which is why John Calvin could call the Psalms “an anatomy of all parts of the soul.” Nothing is left out.

Which brings us to the second point I want to make.

2. The Psalmist feel free to express the full range of human thought and emotion. Whatever they were thinking and feeling ... they feel free to bring it all into conversation with the Living God. So we have Psalm 119 (my favorite): a carefully crafted celebration of God’s self-revelation in Torah. Twenty-two sections, one for each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each of the 22 sections has 8 stanzas, each beginning with the same letter. And we have Psalm 137. Raw emotion. Unbridled rage: “dash their little ones against the rock.”

Eugene Peterson makes the point best in his “Answering God.” Page 100 for those of you reading it this summer.

“It is easy to be honest before God with our hallelujahs; it is somewhat more difficult to be honest in our hurts; it is nearly impossible to be honest before God in the dark emotions of our hate. So we commonly suppress our negative emotions (unless, neurotically, we advertise them). Or, when we do express them, we do it far from the presence, or what we think is the presence, of God, ashamed or embarrassed to be seen in these curse-stained overalls. But when we pray the Psalms, the classic prayers of God’s people, we find that will not do. **We must pray who are actually are ... not who we think we should be.** The way of prayer is not to cover up our unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable, but to expose them so that they can be enlisted in the kingdom of God.”

The problem Psalms free us to open up and entrust the full range of emotion to God.

C.S. Lewis put it this way: “The prayer preceding all prayers is, ‘May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real You that I speak to’.” The Psalms train us in being the real I ... and to express whatever the real I thinks and feels. For the real God, the Living God, is not into religion but relationship. And as is the case with other relationships, the deeper the relationship the wider the scope of what can be safely shared. The Psalmists ... in response to God’s full embrace ... share it all.

God knows it all anyway! We can never hide anything. So we may as well open it all up to Him.

Which leads us to the third point. First point – bring it all. Second point – express it all.

3. Third point: the Living God can handle it all. The God who comes to us in Jesus is not afraid of our emotions; He is not afraid of our anger, our hate. God can handle it.

And the Living God can handle our consequent desire for retaliation and revenge. We need not stuff this problematic stuff. Stuffing it does not make it go away. Stuffing it makes us captive to it. As my friend Baxter Kruger says, “What we bury rules us.” Unacknowledged anger only smolders, waiting for some opportunity to explode – usually an inappropriate time! Unacknowledged anger eats away, and will eventually take its toll. Stuff your anger at the office ... and you kick the dog at home. Stuff your anger at your parents ... and it comes out in your relationship with your spouse. Stuff your anger at God ... and it comes out in a bitter and cynical spirit, poisoning your whole perspective on life. The Psalms free us to acknowledge THAT we are angry and THAT we want revenge. God can handle it. And the Psalms free us to express it all TO the Living God. So we can leave it with the God who can handle it. Not just express it all ... leave it all. The Psalmists never express it all without then surrendering it, trusting God to do with it what Divine justice and mercy deems best.

These problem Psalms, are, therefore, quite consistent with Jesus’ teaching. They are? Yes. For the Psalmists do not take vengeance into their own hands. They express their desire for vengeance ... and leave it in God’s hands.

And they know the Living God can handle it all because they know He understands it all. As Walter Brueggemann says, Yahweh, the Living God, “is not a soft romantic god who only tolerates and forgives, but one who takes seriously his own rule and the well-being of his covenant partners. The raw speech of rage can be submitted to Yahweh because there is reason for confidence that Yahweh takes it seriously and will act” (85). The God who comes to us in Jesus Christ will execute justice on those who do not turn around. Wrong will be righted.

And in that confidence, the Psalmists bring their white-hot anger, leave it in God’s just mercy and merciful justice. BUT they could not leave it until they had first expressed it. And they expressed it because they knew God can handle it.

Now we come to the heart of the matter, to the fourth point.

4. These problem Psalms help us obey Jesus’ command to love the enemy. They do? These Psalms free us for love, for kingdom love. Really? Why? Because we cannot love our enemies until we acknowledge that they are enemies, or feel like enemies. We cannot love our enemies until we acknowledge that deep down inside we hate them for what they have done to us or others.

The fact is, not to hate may, in the final analysis, only reveal that we have not even begun to understand God. The Living God hates hurtful or evil words and deeds. The Living God does not just fold His hands and spout pious platitudes in the face of wrong doing. We ought to be very angry, as God is, when someone is raped, or when a drunk driver causes an accident, or when drug dealers sell their poison to children, or when people sell people to other people. One of the worst realities of our time is sex-trafficking. We ought to be very angry about this. As God is. We are not alive with God's passion for wholeness if we do not hate such injustice and oppression. Am I saying it too strong? Am I over-stating things?

Let me read something to you C.S. Lewis wrote about this in his book, "Reflections on the Psalms." He is wrestling with the "disquieting fact" that Psalms like 109 and 137 are more passionately angry than anything in Pagan literature.

Where we find a difficulty we may always expect that a discovery awaits us. Where there is cover we hope for game. This particular difficulty is well worth exploring.

It seems that there is a general rule in the moral universe which may be formulated "The higher, the more in danger". The "average sensual man" who is sometimes unfaithful to his wife, sometimes tipsy, always a little selfish, now and then (within the law) a trifle sharp in his deals, is certainly, by ordinary standards, a "lower" type than the man whose soul is filed with some great Cause, to which he will subordinate his appetites, his fortune, and even his safety. But it is out of the second man that something really fiendish can be made; an Inquisitor, a Member of the Committee of Public Safety. It is great men, potential saints, not little men, who become merciless fanatics. Those who are readiest to die for a cause may easily become those who are readiest to kill for it. One sees the same principle at work in a field (comparatively) so unimportant as literary criticism; the most brutal work, the most rankling hatred of all other critics and of nearly all authors, may come from the most honest and disinterested critic, the man who cares most passionately and selflessly about literature. The higher the stakes, the greater the temptation to lose your temper over the game. We must not over-value the relative harmlessness of the little, sensual, frivolous people. They are not above, but below, some temptations.

If I am never tempted, and cannot even imagine myself being tempted, to gamble, this does not mean that I am better than those who are. The timidity and pessimism which exempt me from that temptation themselves tempt me to draw back from those risks and adventures which every man ought to take. In the same way we cannot be certain that the comparative absence of vindictiveness in the Pagans, though certainly a good thing in itself, is a good symptom. This was borne in upon me during a night journey taken early in the Second War in the compartment full of young soldiers. Their conversation made it clear that they totally disbelieved all that they had read in the papers about the wholesale cruelties of the Nazi regime. They took it for granted, without argument,

that this was all lies, all propaganda put out by our own government to “pep up” our troops. And the shattering thing was, that believing this, they expressed not the slightest anger. That our rulers should falsely attribute the worst of crimes to some of their fellow-men in order to induce others of their fellow-men to shed their blood seemed to them a matter of course. They weren’t even particularly interested. They saw nothing wrong in it. Now it seemed to me that the most violent of the Psalmists – or, for that matter any child wailing out “But it’s not fair” – was in a more hopeful condition than these young men. If they had perceived, and felt as a man should feel, the diabolical wickedness which they believed our rulers to be committing, and then forgiven them, they would have been saints. But not to perceive it at all – not even to be tempted to resentment – to accept it as the most ordinary thing in the world – argues a terrifying insensibility. Clearly these young men had (on that subject anyway) no conception of good and evil whatsoever.

Thus the absence of anger, especially that sort of anger which we call indignation, can, in my opinion, be a most alarming symptom. And the presence of indignation may be a good one. Even when that indignation passes into bitter personal vindictiveness, it may still be a good symptom, though bad in itself. It is a sin; but it at least shows that those who commit it have not sunk below that level at which the temptation to that sin exists – just as the sins (often quite appalling) of the great patriot or great reformer point to something in him above mere self. If the Jews cursed more bitterly than the Pagans this was, I think, at least in part because they took right and wrong more seriously. For if we look at their railings we find they are usually angry not simply because these things have been done to them but because these things are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as to the victim. The thought of the “righteous Lord” – who surely must hate such doings as much as they do, who surely therefore must (but how terribly He delays!) “judge” or avenge, is always there, if only in the background. Sometimes it comes into the foreground; as in 59, 9 10 “The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance... so that a man shall say... doubtless there is a God that judgeth the earth.” This is something different from mere anger without indignation—the almost animal rage at finding that a man’s enemy has done to him exactly if he had been strong enough or quick enough.

Different, certainly higher, a better symptom; yet also leading to a more terrible sin. For it encourages a man to think that his own worst passions are holy. It encourages him to add, explicitly or implicitly, “Thus saith the Lord” to the expression of his own emotions or even his own opinions; as Carlyle and Kipling and some politicians, and even, in their own way, some modern critics, so horribly do. (It is this, by the way, rather than mere idle “profane swearing” that we ought to mean by “taking God’s name in vain”. The man who says “Damn that chair!” does not really wish that it should be first be endowed with an immortal soul and

then sent to eternal perdition.) For here also it is true “the higher, the more in danger”. The Jews sinned in this matter worse than the Pagans not because they were further from God but because they were nearer to Him.

We are not alive in God’s passion for Shalom if we do not hate evil. More to the point: we are not ready to love the enemy unless and until we first acknowledge that he or she IS an enemy ... and that we hate them. The problem Psalms teach us that it is when we open up the hate, express it to God and leave it with God, that we gain the capacity to love begins to grow. The capacity to love? You see, Jesus did not say, “like your enemies.” Jesus did not say, “feel good feelings for your enemies.” He said, “Love them.” A very different matter! Love is an act of the will. Love is a decision. Choose as an act of the will to will the welfare of your enemy. “If your enemy is hungry, feed them; if he is thirsty, give them something to drink.” I will not do that until I first own the fact that what I really want to do is hurt the other for hurting me or others.

The problem Psalms free us to obey Jesus’ radical call by giving us freedom to express and then release pent-up anger and hate. It is then that the Holy Spirit comes and floods our souls with the Love that dies on the cross for enemies.

“Most of Scripture speaks to us ... the Psalms speak for us.” Prayers that train us to come to the Living God with our real selves – weary, confused, twisted, dirty, angry, empty – and find in Him One who takes it all ... heals it ... and leads us in the way of Peace.

I invite you now to do what the Psalmist frees us to do. I invite you to enter into a little prayer exercise. Bring to the forefront of your mind the “enemy.” Name the person who hurt you or hurt someone you love. Feel – if only for a moment – the pain, the anger, the rage. Tell the Lord what the “enemy” did. Be honest, be specific. [Hear the Lord agree that what the person did is wrong.] Acknowledge to yourself and to the Lord exactly what you would like to see happen to the person. Be honest, specific, ruthless. Then, if you are able, say: “But Lord, I do not want to live with this hate in my soul.” Hear Jesus say to you: “I know. So do this. As an act of your will, will the goodwill of the person. Say to Me, ‘bless the person as You have blessed me.’” You too, Bless the person. If only for a moment. Then hear Jesus say: “You are on your way to freedom. Keep doing this, one little act at a time. And one day you will be free from the need for revenge.” Then hear Jesus say: “Give Me the deep wound. Look away from the enemy and the hurt ... and look to Me.”