

A Cry for Justice

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[0 : 00] Well, we're taking a break tonight from the life of David, just to consider for a few minutes Psalm 82, and really even bigger than that to consider the fact that God gives us a category in the Bible, a specific type of prayer called lament.

And there's lots we can't say about it in 15 minutes or so, but as tonight we're thinking about we're praying about the immense hurt in Ukraine and God gives us a category for how to deal with the problem of pain in our lives.

And that at least is the prayer of lament that we see all across the Bible. And as you know, we I was just praying there's there's immense hurt and pain in so many people's lives because of something like a war.

And we know that at every single moment in all of human history since Adam, there has been immense hurt and pain across every people group across every land. And there is tonight there is across our city, and there probably is immense hurt, perhaps even in this place, that people are coming tonight from all sorts of different places.

And we all know the experience of painful personal events. What do you do with your pain? The problem of pain? Problem of suffering deep in the bowels as the Old Testament puts it.

[1 : 23] And at least we can say that God says lament, lament about it. So how two things first is the call to lament. Now just to talk about this, I just want to step back from Psalm 82 briefly.

The title of the Psalms, the whole book in Hebrew is actually the word *teheem*, which means the book of praises.

And we take the title Psalms from the Greek translation of the Old Testament, which was Psalms. But the original title is the book of praises. And that means that every single Psalm in the book is a praise, is a type of praise.

And so you can go through, as many of you will know, and you can categorize all the ways you can praise God. There are all sorts of different categories. And that's wisdom praises and royal praises and historical praises and thanksgiving praises and the songs of a sin and Zion.

And one of those is lament and actually lament either as an entire Psalm or verses of lament before God are about right at 40% of the entire book of Psalms.

[2 : 34] And they are by far the most text in the book of Psalms. And it's not closed by double our laments. And I think probably, nevertheless, in the modern church, they're the least used.

We use the least that which God has given the most across the book of Psalms. Now, part of that, I think, is because we haven't thought perhaps carefully what a lament really is.

And a lament is not just an expression of sorrow. It is that. It's an expression of deep grief and sorrow, but it also comes with more than that if you look at the lament Psalms carefully.

And that's that laments always include not only the expression of grief, but also complaint, protest, and appeal, as the scholars will put it.

That there's a complaint to God about a circumstance, a protest, why, Lord? And then an appeal. And if you have any of those elements at all, you have a lament.

[3 : 40] And that's why here, people don't normally categorize Psalm 82 as a lament. But if you look down at verse eight, the very end when the people's voice rises up, it is a rise, O God, rise up, O God, and judge the earth.

And that is an appeal. It's saying, this is not working. Please, Lord, get up and judge the world. We only, you can do it correctly.

And so come on, rise up and judge. And that means Psalm 82 is also lament is sorrowing toward God with complaint toward God, protest toward God, appeal toward God for change.

Now Glenn, I read a book this week about laments and a guy named Glenn Pemberton, and it was called Herding with God. And he argues in that book that we today don't know what, we don't use them as often because we don't know what to do with them.

And one of the great examples of this comes from C.S. Lewis, who as you'll know, I find to be unusually right most of the time, but on this he is unusually wrong.

[4 : 52] Okay. In his book, Christian Reflections, he reflects on Psalm 109. Let me just give you a snippet of Psalm 109. It says things like this, a prayer of David against a man who's done something unjustly against David.

He says, a point a wicked man against that man, let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is tried, let him come forth guilty. Let his prayer be counted as sin.

May his days be few. May another take his office. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. And no doubt that that is a hard saying, a hard prayer.

But this is what Lewis says about it. He says, the writer here gives hatred free reign. He encourages it and spurs it on. He was undoubtedly a hot-blooded barbarian, more like a modern child than a modern man.

What good can we find from such stuff? God does not hear such prayers. They're wicked, he condemns them. Now perhaps that's Lewis that is worse because I think Lewis falls prey to his own critique there of what he later calls chronological snobbery.

[6 : 03] Because he says, we know better now than to get so angry that we would pray a prayer of justice like that. We're civilized. That's barbaric type language. And Walter Bruggeman, who may be one of the best, if not the best Old Testament scholar of the 20th century, he gives a completely different reading.

And this is what he says about it. He says, we may read Psalms like Psalm 109 that cry for justice and say, this Psalm doesn't concern me because I've never been that angry.

I don't want to be that angry. As if Bruggeman says, as if that were a virtue. But I suggest that this reflects someone who is only half living.

It is a good idea instead to ask of a Psalm like this, who is it that needs to pray this prayer today? And he's writing during the time of apartheid.

He says, this could it be a voice of a black man in South Africa who has yet again been brutalized by the system or a woman whose life has been forever changed as a victim of the sex crime?

[7 : 09] This is God's, in other words, he says, lament cries for justice as lamentation are God's gift to deal with the problem of pain in a world of injustice, especially when you can't do anything about it.

And that means lament is also God's gift in another way, because lament gives you away, gives me a way of obeying the command of Ephesians 426, where God tells us through Paul, be angry and do not sin.

And how can you possibly have a cat? Maybe as sinful humans don't have a category for anger that's not sinful at the same time, and yet this text says, be angry and do not sin. And how?

Lament. Lament. What is a lament? Lament is the expression of just anger, of just anger. How? Because first, in lament, you cry God word with a complaint, a protest, a longing about the way of the world.

Lament is not venting at God. It's not raging. It's structured, reasonable protest before God about the injustices of the world.

[8 : 19] And the reason it's just, it's righteous is because in a lament, you carry a posture of absolute dependence on God throughout the entirety of it. You say, God, I want you to change this.

I'm saying, why? Why has this happened? Why have you done this? And at the same time, you say, but I know that you're good, and I'm not. And I know that I don't know.

And I know that you're working all things together for the good. And so whatever you do is good. And yet, how long ago, Lord, when will you act? When will you change? When will you rise up and do something?

Now that means that prayer, prayer as lament especially, does not require us to present ourselves in our Sunday best before the Lord and to get the terminology correct.

Lament instead gives you a category that God is saying, when you need to pour your soul, pour your soul Godward and cry out before God and say, why are you doing this?

[9 : 23] Where is your justice? Roll down, rise up and roll down like a mighty river into this situation, into this place. But as I close this point and move to the last one, we could come back to Lewis, maybe later he reflected on this, and say, did you read Revelation 6.10 before you wrote that about the justice Psalms?

Because in Revelation 6.10, the martyrs, the apostolic martyrs say before the throne room of God in heaven, how long, Lord, oh Lord, tell you bring justice for our blood.

They lament, they cry for justice in the land, they protest, they appeal, they cry out to God, but even more, Jesus Christ stood in the Garden of Gethsemane.

And when he was in Gethsemane, he said, my Father, if there could be another way. You know, he appealed, he cried in tears and appealed, it's a lament.

And he said, if there could be another way, let it come to pass and it's righteous because he said, but not my will.

[10 : 36] If there could be another way, then this is my lament before you, but whatever your will is what I shall do. And so he obeyed. And even more than that, the greatest lament of all of human history, the climax of all lamentation is when Jesus Christ hung upon the cross and quoted a psalm of lament and said, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

And so there is righteous lament, there's holy grieving before God. And so the question is tonight, what do you do with your pain? What do you do with your pain?

And what do you do when you look at injustice and there's nothing that you can do? God says at least step one is you lament before him.

Bruggeman says that if we're not lamenting, then that might mean that we're half living because we're not getting angry enough at the great injustices that are around us.

The second thing is this is just a few minutes, Psalm 82. We have a call here to lament injustice specifically. Now, in verse eight is the appeal, rise up, O God.

[11 : 45] And that's actually a different voice speaking in verse eight than the rest of the psalm. Verse one and verse eight are a chorus, but verse two to verse seven are a different voice.

In verse two to verse seven, maybe you noticed are actually the voice of God. This is a very unusual psalm because most of it is in God's voice, him speaking.

And in verses two to seven, what happens is that we have an opportunity from Asaph where he's having a vision and the curtain is being pulled back. And we're allowed to see God in his counsel in heaven.

So God stands up and he's the king in the heavenly throne room, which is also at the same time a courtroom. He is both king and judge at the same time.

And what does he do? He says, he speaks and he says, how long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? And he speaks to who?

[12 : 42] In the midst of the gods. Verse one tells us he's holding judgment. So it says that the curtain's being pulled back. We're seeing God in the throne room of heaven. And it says that he speaks to the gods and says, how long will you fail to judge justly?

Now, who are the gods? I have one sentence on this because we don't have time. This is not polytheism. The gods is a, this is a generic word in Hebrew that would be used all over the place for any human or angel or anybody who takes a position of authority in life.

And so when the gods stand before God here, what we're seeing is the king and the judge of all the earth judging the judges of the earth.

Meaning God has gathered up all the ministers to parliament and presidents and kings and magistrates and rulers and princes and judges and anybody that is ever held in office that is meant to rule above other people.

That's who God has gathered in this vision. And that's who he's talking to. And this is what he says in verses three and four. He says, how long will you judge with injustice, injustice?

[14 : 05] And instead, I want you to give justice to the weak and the fatherless, maintain the right of the afflicted, rescue the weak and the needy. And then it's as if in verse five he turns to speak to his holy angels with the judges of the earth, the princes of the earth who have been wicked and not judged with justice before him and he says, these judges don't have knowledge nor understanding.

They walk about in darkness and all the foundations of the earth, society in other words, is shaken because they're walking in darkness. Society is not working.

It's broken because of their failures. And so then he turns back in verse six and says, but I say to you, you are gods, you are judges, you are kings, you are princes, you are rulers, you are magistrates, you are employers even, your sons are the most high and nevertheless you're going to die just like every other man and fall like any other prince will fall.

And you see what we learn? It's a very simple Psalm actually and what it means. And it's this that in the midst of all the kings of the earth and whatever position you might want to think about, a judge, a ruler that has ruled in pride and vanity without justice who break the backs of the poor, who quench the candle of righteous impartial trial, who occupy their office entirely for self gain, who are power hungry, who rule for their own glory, who have a conquest mentality, who murder and who pillage and who destroy the lives of society.

God is going to bring justice to the land. God is going to judge and only he can do it. And the reason for that, the theology underneath it is that God is full of compassion for the people.

[16 : 00] He wants the people, the poor, the lowly, the those who are not kings and princes to know what it's like to live in a land that's ruled well and that's peaceable and peaceful.

And he wants to have a loving prince. And so he says that God at the, if not before, we see examples all across the Bible of kings of Nebuchadnezzar whom God acts into their lives to judge them for their great injustices.

But if not then, then in the end of history, all unjust judges, rulers, princes will be judged. That's what Psalm 82 says for their grievous injustices.

The lament is clear. We can look, we can look at history and we can say that just like nature is red in tooth and claw, the powers of humanity have been read in tooth and claw.

And that's been in every century of all of human history. Now, in other words, the point, what do you do? What do you do with your pain in the midst of injustice?

[17 : 05] And one, you lament and you pray prayers of lament before God and then you know that the great king of all the earth will bring justice and that he has great compassion on those who have been broken, their backs have been broken by the injustice of evil rulers.

Now, Lewis to close was onto something just slightly because one of the things he is trying to say in his complaint is what do we do with this in the light of Jesus?

And very helpfully, Jesus Christ helps us know because he quotes Psalm 82. In John chapter 10, Jesus quotes Psalm 82 in a really peculiar way, an interesting way.

This had just said before the scribes and Pharisees, I and the father are one and so they wanted to kill him because they knew what he was saying.

And you look at Psalm 82, you think about the 20th century, you look at Ukraine, you look at all sorts of events of history that all of you are well familiar with and you look at people's lives all around us.

[18 : 26] And if Psalm 82 is saying anything in verse 8, it's saying, rise up, oh God, because we need a judge, a ruler, a king, a prince who will truly rule with great justice.

We need a king. We want a king. And in John 10, after Jesus says, I and the father are one, they try to kill him.

And he says, are you trying to kill me because you heard me say I'm God? And he appeals to Psalm 82 and he says, didn't God himself say in the Old Testament that a human could also be God?

He used the language, didn't God use that language in Psalm 82? And he said, Jesus was poking them. And that's because what he was really saying is that Psalm 82, 8, when the chorus says, rise up, oh Lord, and take over, it's ambiguous translation, it's not just you inherit the nations but you possess them now, rise up.

That when Jesus stands before these scribes and Pharisees, he is saying Psalm 82, 8 has been fulfilled in your hearing. The great judge and the true king has now come and he stands before you.

[19 : 46] He is the source of mercy and justice, meaning that yes, he will judge the kings of the earth but also he is the opportunity for mercy for the kings of the earth.

That we can pray prayers of justice but because of Jesus Christ and we should, because of Jesus Christ, how do we start? We start by saying, Lord, great evil has fallen upon the land, will you change the heart of this evil king and president and prime minister and ruler and whoever it might be?

Will you move on them by the Holy Spirit and convict them and make them your son or daughter and then we could have justice temporarily at least?

But if not, Lord, we do ask that justice would be had because that is good. So in the light of Jesus, that's how we're being called to pray prayers of lament.

The Bible, the last word here, the Bible doesn't philosophize about what we do with our pain. It doesn't say how can a good God allow evil, it doesn't go and ask questions like that and instead it says look at the cross of Jesus Christ where the greatest injustice of all of history became the greatest glory and mercy and hope of all history.

[21 : 06] And the last thing it does is it leaves us with Hebrews 5.7. Hebrews 5.7, Hebrews 5.7, well it's the greatest argument for praying prayers of lament because this is what it says.

In the days of Jesus' flesh when he was on earth, he offered up prayers and supplications with loud crying and with tears and he was heard because of his godliness.

Saying, when Jesus was on earth, he cried out in great prayers of lamentation and God listened because of his godliness.

And in that section, it's all about the cross. And you see, you have to look through it just a little bit to see what this is saying.

What is this saying? It's saying that in the time of his greatest cry, his greatest lamentation, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? He was heard because of his godliness, meaning when he was dead and dying on the cross and he prayed at that moment, God heard his lament and responded because Jesus deserved it.

[22 : 24] Meaning that when God rose Jesus up from the dead, it was because Jesus cried out in lamentation and says, why are you forsaking me? And God said, you don't deserve to be dead. Do you know that Jesus rose up from the dead precisely because death couldn't hold him down because he was godly?

Because he deserved it. Because it was a great injustice for the God man who obeyed the law perfectly to be held down forever. And so God listened to him in his godliness and he raised him up because Jesus Christ deserved to be raised.

You know what that means? That means that when you look and say, is there hope for justice in this world, the resurrection is the guarantee that justice will be had because God looked at his son and said, you are just and therefore death will not keep you down.

You deserve to be raised. The resurrection is the guarantee of all justice. And that means that for anybody, an evil king and any of us who come before the king himself and say, I need your justice, I don't have my justice, I know that before God I will be judged like the rulers who've done wickedly.

For every single one of us, justice that you deserve can already be had in him. In him. And so there's hope for every evil king and every single one of us and we know that justice will be had in the midst of great oppression.

[23 : 58] And so lament and justice, pray that those who cause it would turn to Jesus and pray that God's justice would roll down like a mighty river into the land.

We pray it for Ukraine. We pray it for all sorts of things that are happening in our lives. Let's pray. Father, we do pray that prayer now. We lament, we cry and appeal towards you.

We ask why. And we at the same time say you are good. And so we appeal once more that you would stop this war in Ukraine. We appeal in each of our hearts for the problems that we face.

Will you bring healing to our land, to our hearts, to our problems? And we give thanks for the category of lament in the midst of that, Lord. And we do pray for the hearts of so many of our rulers across the world that you would bring them before the feet of King Jesus and that they would learn justice.

And we pray this in Christ's name. Amen.