

Praying When the Righteous Suffer Unjustly

Psalm 59

This is the Sunday between Christmas and New Year's. It's a lot like standing between Christmas cookies and a New Year's resolution not to eat sugar. We're all in a comma but know we have to make changes. Even in a life with every conceivable need met, believers endure suffering.

Psalm 59 is a psalm about the unjust suffering of the righteous: not just the ordinary run-of-the-mill suffering, but unjust suffering that you can do nothing about but pray.

This is precisely the situation the psalmist was in. He complains, *for no transgression or sin of mine; for no fault of mine* (3b, 4a).

Christians have been on the chopping block in Nigeria for the past 16 years, and there is next to nothing they can do about their situation. This past September to our dismay Charlie Kirk was murdered for being a Christian. There was nothing Charlie could have done to prevent the injustice he received. Just a couple weeks ago 19-year-old Ella Cook from Birmingham, AL, was apparently targeted and murdered at Brown University for being a Christian. She was powerless to defend herself.

Unjust suffering that you can do nothing about is a very disorienting experience. The more you try to fix it, the worse it gets; it's confusing; it makes you question your own rationality; it challenges your faith; it makes you long for vindication; it shuts you up to prayer.

I would be shocked if a number of you do not feel trapped in some situation that you feel powerless to overcome.

This psalm is a personal lament. It has all the elements of a lament—a plea (1-2), a complaint (3-4a), a petition (4b-5, 11-13), a statement of trust (6-10), and a vow to praise (14-17). It's a personal lament because it is chock-full of 1st person pronouns—I, me, my. The psalm has 2 parts (1-10, 11-17) each ending with a refrain.

I want to, first, walk through the psalm, and then, make some applications for the sermon points.

The historical reference in the superscription, *when Saul sent men to watch [David's] house in order to kill him*, points directly to 1 Samuel 19:11;

Saul sent messengers to David's house to watch him, that he might kill him in the morning. But Michal, David's wife, told him, "If you do not escape with your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed."

1 Samuel chapters 18-19 provide the larger context of events that inspired Psalm 59. After David killed Goliath, things were going really well, until the army came home from a successful military campaign. The women came out to meet the army singing, *Saul has struck down his thousands, and David his ten thousands* (1Sam 18:7). From that moment, Saul descended into an insane jealousy and sought to kill the unsuspecting David. God was judging Saul, and Saul overlaid it on David.

When we read 1 Samuel 18 and 19, the text is at pains to show the innocence of David in the matter Saul (cf. 1Sam 19:4; 20:1,32; 24:9-13,17; 26:18,21). We want to say, *wake up, David, Saul is trying to kill you*.

It's not until Jonathan told David plainly, *Saul my father seeks to kill you* (1Sam 19:2) that David realized something was up. *But why?*, may have been the paralyzing question in David's mind. *What did I do?*

Not until Saul tried to kill David the 3rd time with his spear (1Sam 19:8-9) did David escape and go home to Michal. Looking out the window at Saul's men waiting in the street, Michal told David, *If you do not escape with your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed* (1Sam 19:11b). Under the cloak of darkness, she let David down through the window, and he escaped (1Sam. 19:12).

David finally realized that for no godly reason Saul intended to kill him. From that point until Saul's death, David was on the run for his life.

What spills out of a person in crisis tells us a lot about him. What spilled out of David was Psalm 59.

1-10: David's counteroffensive of prayerⁱ

David had only one weapon in his conflict with Saul, prayer. David could do nothing to defend himself.ⁱⁱ How do you defend yourself against a king?

A plea (1-2)

So, David made a fourfold plea for divine intervention against a fourfold description of his opponents (1-2): *Deliver, protect, deliver, and save* over against *enemies, those rise up against me, those who work evil, and bloodthirsty men.*

Deliver is to snatch away. *Protect* is to put in a high inaccessible place. *Save* is to rescue or preserve.

A complaint (3-4a)

David offers two reasons for his plea marked by the word, *for* (3-4a). First, *For* they lie in wait for my life and stir up strife against me. Second, *For* no transgression or sin of mine (3c); *for* no fault of mine (4a).ⁱⁱⁱ

A petition (4b-5)

David, then appeals to God to act. The verbs *awake* (4b) and *rouse* (5b) speak of the LORD as if he is asleep on the job. The psalmist wants God to *meet* him in his trouble (4b), to punish (paqad=visit) the nations (5b), and to have *no mercy* on those who plot evil. The verb *spare* (hanan) is mercy. David prays for *No mercy* for his enemies.

The basis his appeal is the character of God: *He is LORD, the God of hosts, and the God of Israel* (5a).

The refrain, a statement of trust (6-10)

The first occurrence of the refrain sets David's opponents in contrast to the LORD (6-10). David, perhaps, peers out of his widow and sees and hears Saul's men *howling, prowling, and bellowing* in the streets. The psalmist imagines their thoughts: *for* "who," they think, "will hear us (7b)?" They think no one can stop them; that they have no accountability; that they can act with impunity.

The psalmist answers their thoughts in verse 8 with a quote from Psalm 2: *But you, O LORD, laugh at them; you hold all the nations in derision* (cf. Ps. 2:4). Not only were the psalmist's enemies accountable to God, the nations were as well.

While Saul's men prowled around in the streets, the psalmist was *watching for the LORD*. The LORD was his *Strength*: he prays, *O my Strength, I will watch for you, for you, O God, are my fortress* (9, *misgab*, cf 1b,16c,17b).^{iv}

The *steadfast love* of God (cf. 10a,16b,17b) would *meet* him or be in front of him or go before him (10a), and the psalmist would see the plots of his enemies fail (10b).

11-17 The larger concern of the prayer counteroffensive is not David's kingdom but the KOG

A petition 11-13

In 11-13, David's petition is odd but enlightening. David prayed that God would not eliminate his enemies immediately, but progressively and ultimately: progressively, so that the people of God would not forget; and ultimately, so his enemies would know that God rules to the ends of the earth (11,13).

He wants them to be trapped by their own *pride* (12-13a, cf. Pss 7:15-16; 9:15-16; 35:7-8; 57:6; 141:10; Prov 26:27; 28:10; Ecc 10:8). Haman is a classic example. He was hung on the gallows he prepared for Mordecai (Esther 7:9-10).

In short, the psalmist desires for God to deal with his enemies in a way that maximizes God's glory in salvation and in judgment, making known God's rule over the earth (13).

A vow of praise 14-17

In verses 14-17, the refrain comes again, setting in stark contrast the conduct of the wicked and righteous in one and the same event: God working to save, the wicked working to kill. Concurrent actions but, oh, so different the result. What causes one to howl, prowl, and growl (14-15) is cause for another to sing (16-17).

Look at the contrast between David and his enemies. At *evening*, David looks out his window at the dogs *howling, prowling, and growling* (14-15), and says, *in the morning I will be singing* (16).

While ruthless, powerful (3) men were waiting to kill David, He was singing of the *strength* of the LORD (16a, 17a). Why? Because God was his *fortress* and *refuge* who shows him *loyal love* (16b).^v

David on the run is an odd but realistic picture of God as our fortress and refuge, who shows us steadfast love. What did that look like at that particular moment in David's life? It looked like Michal lowering David out of the window. But in reality it was God making a way of escape.

What a contrast! Dogs cursing in the streets, and David planning to sing as he repels down the wall.

There's another contrast and it's in David himself. David had moved from *watching* for God (9) and asking for the steadfast love of the LORD to *meet* him (10a) to singing praises of the LORD who was his *strength*, and *who shows* his love even in the middle the most difficult day (16-17).

Applications:

1. It is right and good to pray for God to deliver us from the attack of our enemies (1-2)

In this psalm, the righteous suffer even though they have done nothing to warrant suffering. David was so careful in relation to Saul. He did nothing to provoke Saul, except have success in everything Saul asked him to do.

David was in a situation where he could do nothing to defend himself, through no fault of his own (3-4a). It was a disorienting experience.

In this world, we are going to experience unprovoked attacks for doing good, in a way and from quarters where we have no opportunity to defend ourselves.

This happens in families and extended families. You can do good and receive undue vitriol and unfounded accusations. When you try to answer, things just get worse.

Next, people you don't know and who don't know you, can attack, assign motives, put words in your mouth that you did not say, and do so without being challenged. They are like the dogs in the street bellowing in every direction, thinking, *Who will hear us?* (7b).

This is such a disorienting experience that we can start to think, *Am I wrong? Is God against me?* We are always surprised.

Thankfully, Peter said, *Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed* (1Pet. 4:12-13).

Dear Brother and Sister, we are called to unjustly suffer because Christ suffered unjustly leaving us an example (1Pet. 3:21).

Thankfully, it is right and good to pray for God to deliver us in such a way that not simply vindicates us but shows his glory and his love for us. We don't simply resign ourselves to suffer attack, but we call on God. Prayer is not nothing! The LORD is a high, inaccessible place to flee to. Let the LORD show you love and give you a song in the middle of your trial.

2. God will not put a trial on you that he will not also give you strength to bear.

I was recently at a gathering of friends where we went around the room and talked about all our ailments. No. We shared how the LORD was caring for us. I was struck by how many times the church family was mentioned as a particular blessing.

One friend said, *God will not put a trial on you that he will not also give you strength to bear.* David agrees in Psalm 59.

Three times, in his dire situation, the psalmist mentioned the *strength* of the LORD. Two times he addressed the LORD, *O my Strength* (9a,17a). One time he vowed to sing of the LORD's strength (16a). *Strength* (oz) is the power and might of the LORD. In the psalm it is set over against the power and might of the psalmist enemies: *fierce men stir up strife* (3b, az, power, might, strength).

It seems like the purpose of our attackers is to overpower and intimidate us. We can feel powerless to defend ourselves and stand up under the pressure. We can even feel that the LORD himself is doing nothing to defend us.

We may try to look within and muster up strength, when what we need to do is to rest in the LORD's strength. We need to take our eyes off our enemies and put them on the LORD. This is what the psalmist did. His enemies were in the street waiting kill him, but the psalmist was *watching* for the LORD: *O my Strength, I*

will watch for you, for you, O God, are my fortress (9). We must take our focus off our enemies and place it on the LORD.

Of the many things the LORD may be doing in you through your trial, one thing for sure is, he is teaching you to find your strength in him and not to rely on your own power. When we rely on his strength, He becomes for us that inaccessibly high stronghold and way of escape.

We don't have to fix our situation; we don't have to defend ourselves. We can leave things with the LORD. He will vindicate you over time. He will strengthen you in the trial.

3. Our knowledge of God will give us confidence in the face of trial

Behind the psalmist's plea (1-2) is a deeper knowledge of the character and commitments of God that fortified his confidence.

A. His Character

I cannot think of anything more important for life than knowing God—who he is and how he sees you.

Our confidence in calling God to our defense will be directly related to our knowledge and experience of him.

Psalm 59 uses God's personal name, LORD, 3 times (3c,5a,8).^{vi} God revealed himself by this Name when he overthrew a world superpower to save his people, as the Name by which he is to be remembered (cf. Ex. 3:13-15).^{vii} To know God's Name means something. It is his Personal Name.

Further, the LORD is the *God of Hosts* (5a). *Hosts* could be translated *Armies*. He has all armies at his disposal. He could change our circumstances immediately. If he doesn't snatch us out of our trial, He has a purpose in the trial.

When the righteous are attacked unjustly, I know the rage of their attackers comes out of an indefensible position. I also know that God is using their vitriol and violence to expose them and their empty ideas. Saul's attack on David shows us who Saul was.

The One Who overthrows nations to save his people and has unlimited resources is the *God of Israel*, and our God (5b).

B. His commitments

Steadfast love speaks of God's commitment to his people. Three times the psalmist mentions it (10a, 16b, 17c). This is the love that God set on his people before the world was created, a love that moved him to create the world and call for himself a people out from Adam's fallen race.

The psalmist was confident the in the middle of his trial that God was showing him *steadfast love* (17c).

The unjust, unprovoked attacks of our enemy do not mean that God does not love us anymore than the cross meant the Father did not love the Son. Peter said, *If when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps* (1Pet 2:20b-21).

You could easily think *that is an odd way of showing love*. Yes. But we live in a fallen world. Goodness is attacked in such a world. Jesus was crucified for doing good. The world thinks, *How dare you love your wife, have a happy home, live all righteously. Who do you think you are?*

The very reason for your trial is the love of God, his love for you and your love for him. Knowing God will give you confidence in trials.

4. Faithfulness in trial shows the reality of the rule of God.

Nothing testifies to the reality of faith like the faithfulness of God's people in suffering. Three times in the psalm, the psalmist moves from his situation out to the nations (5b,8,13c). His experience had significance for mankind.

Like the psalmist, we must reason from the lesser to the greater. If God rules over my cause, he must rule over every cause.

Therefore, God has a purpose in the unjust suffering of his people.

The unjust suffering of the righteous comes from a world in rebellion against God. The world has a beef with God and, therefore, with God's people. God will punish the nations (5b).

God is not threatened by what threatens us. He holds the nations in derision (8). He is sovereign over history, and all people are accountable to him. This is God's

answer now and forever to boastful men: *he who sits in the heavens will laugh; he will hold them derision.*

The point of the suffering of God's people and the long, drawn-out judgment of the wicked through the ages is that the rule of God be known to the ends of the earth (11-13).

You really have to ask, why the constant universal attack on Christians through the ages and the slow progressive judgment of God? Two things: it shows the world offers no answers for the issues of life, and it points to the rule of God. Believers who remain faithful in the face of attack clearly demonstrate the reality of the gospel and the rule of God over the nations.

Conclusion:

We should pray for God to deliver us; God will not allow any trial that he will not strengthen us to face; knowing God gives us confidence in trial; We can be sure that God has a purpose in our suffering.

ⁱ This is Motyer's heading, but it is so good in this context! See, Alec Motyer, *Treasures of the King: Psalms from the Life of David*, 28.

ⁱⁱ To have killed Saul would have made David's ascension to the throne look like a coup instead of God's doing.

ⁱⁱⁱ David uses the trio of sin that so often appears in the OT: *transgression* (*pesa*), a deliberate, willful breaking of a known boundary such as the law. The idea of rebellion; *sin* (*hataat*) is missing the mark, falling short of God's standard of perfect righteousness; and *iniquity* (*aon*) is perverse moral crookedness, an inward bent toward evil.

^{iv} *Strength* (*oz*, 9) is power and might. It is in contrast to the *fierce men* (*az*, 3), the mighty, strong, powerful men who are against him.

^v A fortress (*sagab*) is a high inaccessible place. Refuge (*manos*) is an escape, a place to flee.

^{vi} Psalms 42-83, parts of Book 2 and Book 3, is the so called Elohistic Psalter. The Name, LORD, is a rare occurrence in those psalms. Elohim is used 230 times and LORD (YHWH) is used 43 times. Comparatively speaking, YHWH is used around 278 times in Book 1 and Elohim around 45 times.

^{vii} Alec Motyer, *Treasures of the King: Psalms from the Life of David*, 28.