

Psalm 109

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[0:00] So, welcome to St Silas. Thank you for tuning in tonight. Tonight we're going to be thinking about Psalm 109, which is part of a series of the Book of Psalms we have been looking at in the evening.

And the Book of Psalms is a collection of poetry, of music, of prayers that are collected together that give a full expression of what it means to engage well in life, regardless of where we find ourselves.

And Psalm 109 is a particularly tricky one, partly because it is so raw in its motion and the bulk of the psalm, the most of the verses, all the way from verses 5 up to around 20, is David's anger and the expression of his anger about his persecutors towards God.

And so that's what we're going to be thinking about tonight. What happens when we are in these places in life, when we have this experience of life that causes an anger inside us? And what do we do with that? And let alone not only do we do with it, how do we process that before God?

And so that's what we're going to be thinking about tonight. So I'm going to quickly pray and then we'll launch into this. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that it is not ignorant about the realities of human life, the highs and the low.

[1:11] And we thank you that you're not a God that not only sees that, but chooses to engage in our lives with it and calls us to process that with you, to point to a new path. And I pray that as we look at this psalm tonight, you would help us to know what that means for our lives.

I ask that in Jesus' name. Amen. So for thousands of years, the observant Jewish people would have used the book of Psalms as a way to know how to pray and a way to learn how to sing praises to God.

And Jesus would have grown up learning how to do this. It was a forum of how they expressed individually and collectively their questions, their thoughts, their experiences of what was happening in life.

And there are many different examples of the use of poetry and song throughout the scriptures, all the way through from Genesis 1, which is structured in Hebrew like a poem, all the way through to Revelation, which is full of songs.

In Colossians 1, Paul, when he is writing about the beauty of who Jesus is, verses 15 to 20, it's a structure that he breaks out into a song about who Jesus is.

[2:13] And those things, the use of creative and poetic language to express a reality doesn't make it somehow lesser, but he's trying to put into words the feelings of what is happening and to express that to God.

The whole music industry is built upon this principle that we take our feelings and experiences and thoughts and we mould it into something that we express and then other people join in on to. But the Psalms are more than just nice songs. They touch into the depths of reality, highs and lows, and then actually then bring that before God too. And throughout the Psalms, there is a multitude of different emotions that you see, from joy and sorrow, to praise, to anger, from confidence to confusion.

It is all over the place. But there is kind of two big umbrellas you can hang a lot of the Psalms under. There's the Psalms of praise, which draw attention to what's good, what is joyful, what is praiseworthy.

And then there's the Psalms of lament, the Psalms of sorrow, of anger and confusion. And it's quite clear that Psalm 109 is one of the Psalms of lament. And for a lot of us, we can maybe be quite comfortable with the idea that when we think about praying and singing, it's fine to bring the positive stuff before God, that it's quite easy to do that.

[3 : 28] But the more negative feelings, we may feel quite uncomfortable with the idea of what it means to do that. In fact, ironically, given what the Psalm will go on to say, you could potentially even feel angry that I am suggesting that the Psalms not only agree that you should bring them before God, but actually legitimize and show how we do that.

But the reality is that makes us quite uncomfortable. And Psalm 109 can be uncomfortable reading when you read some of what David expresses he would like to happen to his persecutors.

And just before we launch in, I think it's important to address that when we talk about dealing with our emotions, it's just obvious that people grew up in quite different camps of how they experience that in life.

Some people, the idea of engaging and talking about emotions makes them really uncomfortable, because potentially you're emotional as a rock. Whereas other people, the idea of talking about emotions is where is that?

That is what you do. That is where your life is. You feel what you feel and you just go. And for a lot of us, that comes from the experience of where we grew up in life. One place might be you're taught to stuff your emotions down.

[4 : 34] You deny them. You don't talk openly about things. You especially don't talk openly about difficult things. And the only form of real communication about what you're feeling is passive aggression. Essentially, you learn to distrust emotions.

Yet equally, you could grow up in a different household where the emotional volume at the dinner table is turned up to 11. And there's huge displays of anger and happiness, and then there's hugging.

And you give full vent to your emotion, but to the point where they're in the driving seat, and you end up doing and saying things that you later regret and have to apologize for. The beauty of the Psalms, and I think especially this Psalm we're going to look at tonight, is they do neither.

They find a middle way. They show us how to pray through your emotions. And this is something most of us don't naturally do or experience, because this is not stuffing down and repressing your emotions, but neither is it letting them overtake and become the controlling thing.

Because the reality is, whilst our emotions are always real, they're not always true. And also, there is no such thing as, in my opinion, as a therapist, if I want to pull a professional card there, there's no such thing really as bad emotions and good emotions.

[5 : 48] There are emotions. How we express them and how we deal with them and how we engage with them is a different thing altogether. And so actually this idea that emotions can be in control for some of us can be quite a dangerous place, and we can see it obviously.

But the idea that emotions aren't in control if you're denying them and repressing them is, again, untrue, because eventually they come out somewhere else. And the Psalms, again, do not allow for either option. They bring them into the light for who God is, with full honesty and vulnerability, but they go somewhere, they lead somewhere.

And to look at the Psalms through that lens, a little tool I've learned over the years, which we're going to apply as a little model to Psalm 109, are these four principles that you see a lot of the times in the Psalms.

These are four stages that the Psalmists often go through. It's not often here, like, as a very often sequential, although I think it is in this Psalm. And it's this process of beginning with one, this crying out to God of our experience of what life is like, followed by, secondly, this leaning in to who God is, which leads to the third principle of seeing our reality differently, which leads to the fourth principle of desiring something new.

So that's crying out, leaning in, seeing differently, and desiring anew. And that's the framework we're going to use to look at Psalm 109 for the rest of our time. So to begin with crying out, which, again, if you're uncomfortable with emotion, is the bulk of this Psalm.

[7 : 23] 100 verses 1 to 20 is a lot of David crying out, and he is mainly crying out in anger. Verses 1 to 5, My God whom I praise, do not remain in silence.

David is like, his perception is God is potentially, it feels like he is being quiet here. That doesn't stop David speaking. For people who are wicked and deceitful have opened their mouths against me.

They have spoken against me with lying tongues. With words of hatred they surround me. They attack me without cause. In return for my friendship they accuse me.

But I am a man of prayer. They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my friendship. So again, David immediately calls out and sets quite quickly the situation that is happening. He is not only experiencing persecution, he is experiencing persecution in light of trying to seek to love others well. In light of being a man of prayer, a man of trying to show love.

[8 : 25] What he is met with is actually evil. Now this isn't a case of David having to face the consequence of some bad decisions. This isn't like he made a mistake somewhere, and no, life isn't going well, and there he's just angry about it.

But this isn't also David being angry because he's treating people in one way and wants to be treated another way in return. This is not like, well, I'm being really nice to them and they're not giving me back what I want.

This is something far more serious. It is this place where actually he is acting lovingly and faithful, and in response to seeing that, people are persecuting him, mocking him, attacking him, and it results in this anger.

And if you've been a Christian for any length of time, then you will almost certainly come across this reality that can feel like a contradiction. It's a formidable challenge to faith. It's a theology issue, but it's also a very personal issue.

And that is essentially that when we gather together, we believe God is good, he is real, he is present, he has a will for our lives, he has a heart to save all of humanity, he loves the world and everyone in it.

[9 : 32] And we hold on to that, not just because it sounds nice, but because we can point to God's actions in history and affirm that. For David, in the Old Testament, that would have been the freedom of the slaves from Egypt and the giving of the covenant as God entering into history and giving his promises.

For us, that's even more fuller in the person of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection for each one of us. And we affirm all that to be good and true. Yet at the same time, we know, if you've been alive in the world in this world any length of time, that you can look around and there's tragedy and horror of human history everywhere.

And how do these things stick together? For many, when hardship and tragedy come into our lives, initially we just do not know what to do. We try to hold on to this belief of God's goodness, but then inevitably we might start to question it or just let it go altogether.

Alternatively, you might be tempted just to diminish God's to some sort of absentee landlord. So he's around, but actually he has nothing to do with all of this. And if you haven't dealt with this, then it's part of the human experience.

This is part of what David is expressing here. I'm a man of prayer. I'm showing love. I'm being a friend. Yet this is my experience in return.

[10 : 44] It is evil. It's a part of all human experience when we can't just rationalize everything we see in front of us. In fact, I think there's a big move in atheist philosophy to try and rationalize this experience.

You just need to make the best of bad situations and reframe it as something positive. In fact, Ricky Gervais' show *Afterlife*, the comedy on Netflix, is pretty much entirely based around that philosophy, which sounds nice and looks nice.

Personally, I don't think it holds up to much scrutiny. And the good news is the Book of Psalms, it does not try to solve this intellectually for David or for us.

The emphasis is not on the why and how of the evil that David is experiencing and reacting to here. But what is God up to in the midst of this? And this psalm, like a lot of the psalms, gives us language of how to pray in these times.

And it's done in nearly over 50 of the psalms. And it's what David says he will do here. But I am a man of prayer. And that is exemplified in the fact that he writes the psalm, which is his prayer of response.

[11 : 44] The challenge is often that the response is initially quite uncomfortable for us as hearers. But it's the beginning of what David would have learned and what a lot of the Jewish people would have learned and what Jesus would have learned, that the psalms give language to cry out to God.

And that is completely fine, completely legitimate. He does not try to play some sort of cosmic game of hide and seek with God, where he takes his feelings, tidies them up, pretends them not the bigger they are, and then presents them to God.

He is raw here. And what does he ask for? Well, he goes beyond, which starts in verse 6, appoint somebody evil to oppose my enemy.

So it starts with this idea of David handing over his enemies and asking for retribution to bring trouble on the enemies that they deserve.

But it quickly escalates. David eventually starts wishing their life to be shortened in verse 8 for poverty for the person who's persecuting and his family in verses 9 to 12.

[12:43] May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars. May they be driven from the ruined homes. And that actually further, he has no descendants whatsoever.

That his family name would be forgotten. And actually, David gets to the point in verses 14 and 15, where he asks, he essentially wishes, he doesn't essentially ask, it's may, which is a different kind of language, that they receive no forgiveness and actually God would constantly hold their sin against them.

Which is a pretty severe thing to express to God. But we express these thoughts in our minds and our hearts all the time, actually, if we're honest about it. When we feel enraged by a particular injustice, the dark thoughts that we can have about people who are especially, even sometimes our brothers and sisters, are there.

David does not hide them. He brings them to God. He writes them down. This would have been sung by God's people in the assembly at times. And it's important to note, though, again, as I say, this is not just David, somebody being slighted David.

The description of them that David goes on to talk about in verses 16 to 18, of who these people are and what they're like, it shows that there's something quite serious going on. The people David is raging about and protesting here are quite grievous sinners.

[14:02] They're covenant members who are not only unfaithful to the covenant, but they use whatever means they can to oppress God's people. There is also kind of an unstated assumption they're completely unrepentant about it.

And so David is expressing a kind of right anger. Yeah, how the language he uses might be uncomfortable, but we're only halfway through the psalm at this point. Actually, we're two-thirds away through this psalm at the point.

A lot of it has just been David crying out about his reality. And you might think, David, you can't speak like that. David, you shouldn't use language like that.

Have you heard somebody pray like this in a prayer meeting? You might be, wow, you shouldn't say things like this. But the psalms are full of this, where there's a clear enemy and they are praying and they're experiencing and wanting justice to happen.

And any situation where you're being treated negatively in life or trying to be faithful is not only lonely, but it's a horrible place to be. I remember, just as a kind of smaller example, when I used to be a structural engineer in a previous life, in my last year there, I went part-time in order to work with the navigators who I currently work with, which the charity, the organisation I worked for at the time, were completely happy to do.

[15:18] But one of my line managers took a real exception to the fact I was allowed to do this. And he took exceptional exception to the fact that I was doing it with a Christian organisation. And we had a really tough working relationship.

And so as a young, maybe naive Christian at the time, I was like, well, I just need to be loving here and show kindness and pray about it and it'll all be fine. That year was horrible at work.

Maybe I was not a very good engineer, which is also part of the equation, but it was a horrible experience. And I ended up leaving at the end of that year, not exactly just because of that, but my confusion and prayers to God were very much along the lines of, why is this happening?

I'm trying to do the right thing, yet what I'm being met back with is persecution of a form. Yet equally, there's far more serious examples than that than me having a bad year at work.

One of the immediate ones that jumps to my mind is one of my mum's previous husbands was hugely physically abusive to her and the family. And it was completely unpredictable when we were children. And actually, it was more confusing when she would attempt to be loving and nice and it was met with essentially an evil and a violence.

[16:31] And I know for myself that anger hasn't just disappeared. If I think about that too long, it will bring up a certain type of anger and sadness in me. But I've learned through things like the Psalms that God doesn't not only want to not hear, God not only wants to hear about that, he wants

me to help to process that with him and what do I actually do with that?

Because in a lot of these situations, it is impossible to not have a reaction of anger. And to be told, which I've heard people use before, you just need to keep your head down and not think these things, is not only unhelpful, but doesn't really fit with the language of the Psalms.

This is a Psalm of calling out to God about the pain the writer is experiencing and sharing with God what they're feeling and what they're thinking. And again, you might still think David shouldn't be speaking like this, but what are the alternatives?

What are the alternatives when we have this level of anger and sadness in our lives? If you just stuff it down, it will come out somewhere else. I'm sure you know examples about that. As a therapist, one of the main places, one of the main reasons, sorry, people get referred to me is for anger management.

And it's because there are these people who are peaceful in all of life, yet in certain situations their rage comes flying out. You'll have seen it with people who are good, nice people, put them behind the wheel of a car and they go mental.

[17 : 48] And you don't have to be a psychologist to think that feels a bit disproportionate to what's happened. A lot of the guys I play football with are absolutely lovely blokes, but you put them on a football field and they become like absolute monsters as this place where their anger and rage spills out everywhere because they repress a lot of things in life and they don't deal with it.

Yet also, the other alternative that our culture affirms is revenge. Actually, David should follow through on all this. Get out there and get back at your enemies. And David could be a violent man. He has done things like that in the past where he reacts. The one Shakespeare play I know anything about from having studied at school is The Merchant of Venice and Shylock, the Jewish merchant, moneylender, who is persecuted throughout the play, who gives his famous speech about do not Jews have eyes.

If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? He is reminding, Shylock is reminding his persecutors, the Venetians, that all people are human.

And as you join in in the speech, you have a lot of sympathy for him, rightly. And the speech, however, feels like a shared celebration of what it means to be human. And it feels at first that he's taken the higher road.

[19 : 09] But actually, Shylock's conclusion is, I'm going to get you back for what you've done. And in fact, I'll get you back even more. I will be better at getting you back than you have done to me. And so we're kind of left with, would you just suppress it and pretend it's not there or just act upon it and go for it?

Well, we see a shift as David starts to move this process of, here's all his anger, and he starts to lean in to who God is in verse 21. And he leans in in sadness and honesty in verse 21.

But you, sovereign Lord, help me for your name's sake. Oh, of the goodness of your love, deliver me. David starts to ask for God's protection and he leans into God's steadfast love.

It's a phrase that will come up later in the psalm. And generally, when we are praying and experiencing life, I know from what I'm like a lot of the time, we generally have three types of prayer. Thank you, thank you, thank you. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, or help me, help me, help me. And for most of us, when something difficult happens in our midst, the prayer most of us get into is one of request, help me.

[20 : 16] And you do see David do that. He asks God for help and he is allowed to do that because of God's steadfast love. And all the prayers of lament do have requests in there and there are some in this psalm, but they're a really small proportion of the prayer.

Crying out to God in protest about the injustices for being suffered through song, poetry, images, always been part of the Jewish people and therefore Christians as well and the book of Psalms of how they've expressed reality as they have this tension of here's our experience but we lean in to the reality of who God is.

And what that results in is then David shifting his focus away from his enemies onto himself and being honest with God about how he is experiencing this. This is a shift in tone.

The anger is kind of gone and David leaning into God's presence is more honest with God about how he is experiencing this and it's sad, it is sorrowful, it is tired language yet it is tinged with this hope of a God who he's asking for help.

And that is powerful when you see that in action, when you read it and pray and are even allowed to pray to God in this way and that God does not shy away from this type of prayer. Over lockdown I've been delving into more pretentious forms of cinema as I tend to do anyway and I recently watched the brilliant 2018 documentary *Amazing Grace* which is a recording of Aretha Franklin's 1972 concert slash church service that she does in LA and it's a powerful thing to watch not simply because it's amazing and the music is brilliant but it's kind of spine tingling because you know watching it especially with everything that's happening in the culture at the moment these are songs of hope but they're kind of songs of protest at the same time from the African American community in America at that time because many gospel musicians have sung about their experiences and their faith not only to give hope to the people they provide the music for but it's a way to speak plainly about the persecution that they were experiencing all the way from the slave trade right into the 70s so if you're watching this you're watching this beautiful music but it has this extra resonance as they're taking some of their pain but they're directing it out in praise to God and it's a powerful thing

[22 : 48] Professor Johnson of Music at the University of South Carolina says gospel music was one of the few avenues where African Americans had their own voice where they could say and sing what they were feeling and so the majority of this prayer is not whilst there's requests in there it is an expression to God of what's happening and when we want to ask God for things we assume God already knows how we feel we just need to ask for God to sort this and usually our prayers then become telling God how to sort that so we might be like well I don't need to tell him how I'm experiencing it he knows that but I just need to ask that he fix his X, Y and Z the Psalms are kind of the opposite the assumption is God will know what to do but God needs the emphasis is on sharing the experience of what's happening and this leads into verse 26 which is another shift so David has moved from his anger into listening and thinking about God's steadfast love which opens us up to his sorrow and then it leads him into seeing something differently in verse 26 where he says help me

Lord my God save me according to your unfailing love let them know that it is your hand that you Lord have done it David knows if deliverance is going to come from anywhere it's not going to come from David himself it's going to come from God and again we see this idea of God's unfailing love that God's love the steadfast love of verse 21 and the unfailing love in verse 26 it is robust it is hope David is venting and processing his emotions before God actually allows him to do something remarkable he hands over his anger to God and that's what's happening in these prayers it's a profound act of faith as he commits his enemies over to God's justice and asks God to take care of it something time and again that David actually experiences is in his own life one of the most extraordinary claims of this prayer is that the writer desires to be a place not only where they hand over their enemies but they will experience joy in the midst of this verse 28 says while they curse you will bless for those who attack me be put to shame but may your servant rejoice there's something really unique about the Christian faith it's not when we have persecution or something hard happening in life we expect joy will come after that thing is gone what David is praying for here which allows him to see differently after he's led into

God's steadfast love is that he will experience joy in the midst of this part of the handing over of his enemies to God's justice is that he will be allowed to experience joy and rejoicing and if that is true of him that is even more true for us who believe in Christ because Jesus is the ultimate example of someone who brought joy out of sorrow I mean he literally brings joy out of the sorrow of his death as he stands in our place and we see Jesus dying so that we may live so he can bring joy to the world this can enable us to experience and process our sorrow in a far better way I think that's true for four reasons there's more than four but here are four anyway one we won't suffer in guilt this reality of who Christ is dispels any thought that maybe I'm suffering because God is punishing me well no the gospel tells us Jesus took our punishment secondly it means we won't suffer in self pity and anger saying how dare God let this happen to me the cross reminds me that God is not only not alien to suffering himself but he has suffered more than I ever will so I may enjoy intimacy and relationship with him thirdly I can suffer impatience

Jesus' disciples did not understand what was happening when Jesus went to the cross they expressed things like what good can come of this whenever Jesus spoke about his death but of course we know God did bring good out of what felt like the most darkest of times and we are connected now to the father whose love is steadfast it holds us it protects us which David mentions

at least twice in this psalm and that leads us into the kind of fourth and final stage where we are going to end that not only does David end there with maybe I will experience joy in the present it is a new desire verses 30 and 31 that this will all end in praise with my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord verse 30 in the great throng of worshippers I will praise him for he stands at the right hand of the needy to save the lives of those who would condemn him this is a hope that goes far beyond just the moment it is the hope that David will stand with the throng which is a remarkable picture of what it means to have life together this experience will lead him to sing with other people about what's happened but ultimately everything will end in praise and that's the way the book of Psalms ends there's these five

Psalms particularly Psalm 150 where the tone through all this lament and pain there's a position of praise Tim Keller has this quote about the book of Psalms in general the five hallelujah Psalms at the end of the book are extraordinarily robust this means no matter how we suffer no matter how much our doubts no matter how angry we get no matter how many times we have asked in desperation how long oh Lord prayer always develops finally into praise everything finds its way to the doorstep of praise this is not to say other prayers are inferior to praise only that all prayer pursued far enough becomes praise don't rush it it may take years decades even to arrive at the hallelujah of Psalm 150 not every prayer is capped off with praise in fact most prayers of the Psalter as a true guide do not cap off with praise but prayer is always reaching towards praise and will finally arrive there so our lives will be filled out with goodness earth and heaven will finally meet in an extraordinary conjunction clashing symbols announce the glory blessings amen and hallelujah and so sometimes we don't know how long it took David to go from verse 20 to verse 21 and into verse 26 but the book of Psalms as the whole of scripture holds together that in the midst of our pain and experience of life

[29 : 02] God is present his steadfast love holds us and he calls us to be honest with all of what we're feeling and part of the reality is if we're not that has an impact not just on us but we're called to carry one another's burdens we're called to comfort others if we do not experience comfort from God ourselves how are we supposed to help others share in that so the Psalms provide us with a language of prayer they're intense with emotions that range from anger to gratefulness towards God they teach us how to pray and how to talk to Jesus and invite us into the salvation of the steadfast love of the Father to see new possibilities when everything feels hopeless amen