

Praying for Justice

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[0 : 0 0] morning. My name is Matthew Capone and I'm the pastor here at Cheyenne Mountain Presbyterian Church and it's my joy to bring God's word to you today. Special welcome if you're new or visiting with us. Welcome. We're glad that you're here and we're glad that you're here not because we are trying to fill seats but because we are following after Jesus together as one community and as we follow after Jesus together we're convinced that there's no one so good that they don't need God's grace and no one's so bad that they can't have it and so we're convinced that we come because we which mic should I use? Sorry. We're also convinced that we have a lot of technical difficulties.

We're convinced that everyone needs to hear what God has to say in his word and so that's why we come Sunday after Sunday. God has something to say to people who have been Christians their entire lives. he has something to say to people who have only recently become Christians and he has something to say to people who have doubts and questions and objections about Christianity and so that's why every Sunday we open up God's word to see what he has to say to us. If you've been with us you know that we're in the book of Psalms and the book of Psalms as I've been telling you is the prayer book and the hymn book of God's people in the Old Testament. It's a guide for how they should worship God and it continues in the New Testament as well and so people in the New Testament God's people the church have also used the Psalms. We see it quoted throughout the entire New Testament and as I've mentioned before there's lots of different ways that we could talk about the Psalms. One that I mentioned in December was that it's the standard operating procedures for the Christian life so when we come up against different circumstances or situations there's often a psalm for it. Now we've seen before just the last couple weeks we have Psalms of Lament, Psalms 3 and 4 when we face difficulty in life and I've shared with you last week another way that we think about the Psalms is they're sort of like paintings of water lilies by Monet. I mentioned that there are about 250 different paintings of water lilies by Monet and so there's this similarity between all of them. They're all of water lilies but they're also of different shades and colors and circumstances and so we don't just look at one painting and say we've seen it all and we also don't just look at one psalm. So there's two things going on. First we see the same themes over and over and second we see different colors and different shades. We see different pieces in each psalm that help us understand a different aspect of the Christian life. We're going to see that this morning. We're going to be looking at Psalm 5 and we're going to see many of the same things we saw in the past. So Psalm 1 we talked about the fact that there are only two ways to live. Those who follow after God and those who don't. We're going to see that again in Psalm 5. Psalm 2 we saw that there are nations and people that rebel against God and that God is the great king who's going to bring his justice. We're going to see that again in Psalm 5. In Psalm 3 the last psalm that I preached we saw that it was a psalm of lament which means that it's a psalm about how we have hope in the midst of difficult circumstances and that's going to be true about Psalm 5 as well.

However here's what's different about Psalm 5. It's going to have its own particular shade and color and circumstance and that's because it's what we call a, it's going to be a big word, an imprecatory psalm. An imprecatory psalm. And that is just a fancy theological psalm way of saying that this is a psalm that asks for God to curse someone. I'm going to say that again. This is a psalm that asks for God to curse someone. And if I didn't have your attention before I hope that I have it now.

We have this psalm for many reasons. One of this which is that all of us have people in our lives, I would say most of us, maybe not all of us, but most of us have people in our lives either in the past or in the present. This could be someone that we know personally. It could be someone we don't know, but they have a lot of power. And it's someone that we long for them to see God's justice.

[4 : 08] There are people in our lives that we long for them to face God and to see his justice because of the things that they are doing or have done. And so what do we do with our longings for justice?

And what do we do with a psalm that calls for God's destruction? Especially since Jesus himself told us that it's our responsibility to turn the other cheek and to pray for those who persecute us. So with that question, I hope I've gotten your attention. You probably weren't expecting to come to church and hear a sermon about cursing. That's where we're at in Psalm 5, and it's with that that we come to read together.

And so we're reading from Psalm 5. It's in your worship guide near the end. It's perhaps on your phone. It may be in your Bible. I invite you to turn to any of those to follow along. And I'm going to be reading beginning at verse 1.

And as we start, remember that this is God's word. And God tells us that his word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. In other words, God has not left us alone to stumble in the dark, but instead he shows us the way to walk.

[5 : 15] And that's why we come to his word. And so I invite you to read with me to follow along. Give ear to my words, O Lord. Consider my groaning. Give attention to the sound of my cry, my King and my God.

For to you do I pray. O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice. In the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch. Verse 4.

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness. Evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes. You hate all evildoers.

You destroy those who speak lies. The Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man. Verse 7. But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house.

I will bow down toward your holy temple in the fear of you. Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies. Make your way straight before me.

[6 : 17] Verse 9. For there is no truth in their mouth. Their inmost self is destruction. Their throat is an open grave. They flatter with their tongue. Make them bear their guilt, O God.

Let them fall by their own counsels. Because of the abundance of their transgressions, cast them out. For they have rebelled against you. Verse 11. But let all who take refuge in you rejoice.

And let them ever sing for joy. And spread your protection over them. That those who love your name may exult in you. For you bless the righteous, O Lord.

You cover him with favor as with a shield. I invite you to pray with me as we come to this portion of God's word. Dear Father in heaven, we thank you for your word that you've given to us.

We thank you for the times when it comforts us. We thank you for the times that it challenges us. And we also thank you for the times that it surprises us. We ask that you would do all of those things this morning with this psalm.

[7 : 22] That you would help us to understand everything that you have for us in your word. We ask these things not because we have earned them. But because Jesus has. And so we ask them in his name.

Amen. Okay, I began by asking you a tough question. What do we do with a psalm that calls on God to curse someone? And I'm just going to point out to you right now.

I'm going to jump around a little bit in this psalm where that happens. We're looking at verse 10. And the psalmist says in verse 10, In other words, the psalmist is asking for God to destroy the enemies that we've seen earlier in this psalm.

These enemies we saw in verses 4 and 5. And then verses 9 and 10. And to help you understand this, I'm going to do what I sometimes do, which is tell you a story. So there's many interesting things that have happened throughout the years as I've worked since I graduated from college. And one of them, when I was teaching, I had a variety of things that I would do during the summer. And one summer, I ended up being what's often called a nanny. Short for a male nanny.

[8 : 36] And I got connected with a parent at the school who had a son in kindergarten. And she wanted someone to watch her 3-year-old and her 5-year-old over the summer. So it involved many trips to the pool, a few trips to the bounce house.

In fact, one time we were on the way to the bounce house and we had a seatbelt unbuckling fight. Which I do not recommend. We had to turn around and go home and not go to the bounce house. But one of the things that was challenging was that the 5-year-old had a severe case of what I

would refer to as third parent syndrome.

And if you're not familiar with third parent syndrome, that's okay because I made up the term. And if you're a youngest child, you know exactly what this is. And this is when someone who's older than you, who's one of your siblings, decides that they are the third parent.

And so this older son thought that at times it was his responsibility to administer spankings. And to provide discipline when necessary to the younger son. And so it was very challenging for the parents.

Thankfully I didn't have to face this very often. But it was important to remind this child that he was in fact not the third parent. He was another child. And so it was not his responsibility to bring discipline to bear in situations where something wrong was going on.

[9 : 54] And maybe his judgments were correct. Maybe he was right that the younger child was doing something that he shouldn't do. That was correct many times. In fact, both of them did all sorts of things that they shouldn't do. I can tell you all sorts of stories outside of this morning.

But this third parent syndrome, if there were no parent, right, the response to this child is to tell him, hey, you have this problem with your younger son, your younger brother.

It's not your job to administer discipline. It's your job to go to your parent and it's your job to talk to them. Because they are the ones who are in charge. They're the authority. They're the ones who can bring discipline to bear.

They're the ones who can bring judgment. And so that's the process that you have. That's your option. That you can always come and appeal to a parent. And so this psalm, Psalm 5, is good news.

It's good news that we can pray for God's judgment because it protects us from third parent syndrome. I'm going to put it a different way.

[10 : 54] Anyway, Jesus tells us in Matthew 5 that we're supposed to turn the other cheek. And that we pray for those who persecute us. And you might be thinking, how can we turn the other cheek and be praying for those who persecute us when we have psalms like this where we're praying for God's judgment and his destruction?

And the answer is that in precatory psalms, these psalms are what actually enable and empower us to turn the other cheek. What makes it possible for the older brother to not bring discipline on the younger brother is knowing that there's a higher power and a higher authority that he can appeal to. And so rather than this being the opposite of nonviolence, the opposite of loving our neighbor, the opposite of not taking justice into our own hands, this psalm is what allows us to do that.

Knowing what we learned in Psalm 2, that God is the great king and that he's bringing justice to bear. That is good news for us because it's what protects us and saves us from third parent syndrome.

We ask God to bring judgment so that we can turn the other cheek. We ask God to bring judgment so that we can turn the other cheek as Jesus commands.

[12 : 15] The older brother comes to his parents and asks them to bring discipline in a particular situation so that he can turn the other cheek. It's knowing that there is a great king that we can appeal to that allows us to live at peace with others.

We all have longings for justice, as I mentioned before. We all want justice. Extremism is what happens when we decide that we're the ones who are supposed to bring it.

Extremism and radicalism is what happens when we decide that we are the ones responsible for bringing judgment. In other words, this five-year-old was a terrorist.

He believed that it was his job to bring judgment to the earth. And so this psalm, Psalm 5, is good news because it allows us to bring our longings for justice to God rather than bringing justice and taking it into our own hands.

And this helps us understand why the psalms are so crucial and so important for our lives. So important for us as Christians that we trust God for his justice as we face all kinds of evil and wickedness in this world.

[13 : 35] Now, Jesus didn't just tell us to turn the other cheek. He also told us to pray for those who persecute us. Now, I could be snarky and I could suggest that this is a prayer for those who persecute us.

I don't think that's what Jesus was getting at. What I will say is those things are not mutually exclusive. We can pray for God to convert those who oppose him and do wickedness in this world.

But we also know that that will not always happen. That there are some people who do not choose to follow after God and his ways. And so we are never praying that evil and wickedness would continue unhindered.

It is good and right for us to do both. We can pray for those who persecute us, people who are evil and wicked in this world. We can pray that God would bring them to repentance. We can also pray at the same time that God, if they do not, would bring his judgment.

And that's part of what allows us to live with hope in this world. It's part of how we work Psalm 2 into our lives.

[14 : 41] Remembering that Jesus is the great king when the nations rage. It's by coming to God and telling him, this is wrong. We are begging you to bring justice to this world.

We realize it's not our job. We realize we're not the third parent. And so we're asking you to do it. We're asking you to do that and so we can live at peace. We don't have to take justice into our own hands.

Now Jesus also, we've already actually prayed an imprecatory prayer indirectly in this worship service. You may not have realized it, but we prayed the Lord's Prayer.

And we prayed, your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Guess what? God's kingdom does not come in fullness without the destruction of everything that is wicked.

And so when we pray the prayer that God gave us, the Lord's Prayer, we are indirectly praying that God would bring justice on everything that is wicked. He would either bring wicked people to repentance or he would bring them to justice.

[15 : 45] And so God's kingdom coming will inevitably bring the destruction of wickedness. I say all this at the beginning to make the point that what Jesus has told us in the Gospels does not take this psalm and get rid of it.

It doesn't refute it. It doesn't abrogate it in any way. But instead it goes along with it. It enables and empowers us to do everything that Jesus asks us and commands us with our enemies. And so we'll talk in a little bit about how we pray for destruction.

But first I want to stamp a flag right here. That we still can come to our good Heavenly Father, the great Psalm 2 King, and ask him to bring judgment on those who are destroying things in this world. Finally, talking about Jesus, he is the one who didn't just come to die. He also brought judgment and declared judgment. He's bringing judgment. In Luke chapter 10, Jesus declares judgment on unrepentant cities.

In Matthew 23, he declares judgment on the Pharisees. And so as I've mentioned before, God's love and his judgment are not things that we have to divorce from each other. They're things that go together both in his first coming and in his second coming.

[16 : 55] Now there are some people that argue that these imprecatory psalms don't have a place in the New Testament. I'm not going to go into all of that right now. If you would like, I'm happy to talk about it after. I'll simply say this. In precatory prayers show up in the New Testament.

In fact, one of the places that we see them is in the very end of the Bible. In Revelation chapter 6, the martyrs, those who have been killed because of their faith in Jesus, cry out an imprecatory prayer in verse 9.

And they ask God when he comes to bring justice for them. And so if these psalms, these psalms asking for God's judgment have been gotten rid of in the New Testament, it would not make a lot of sense for that to occur in Revelation.

That's all I'll say. I'm happy to talk more about that later. And so this prayer for destruction that people in the Old Testament prayed, it is our prayer as well. It is something that God has given to us when we face people whose goal and aim in this world is to steal and kill and destroy.

God wants us. First of all, he knows that we face those situations. He knows that we have leaders in this world who make that their goal. And second, as we've seen in almost every psalm, he wants us to talk to him about it.

[18 : 11] He wants us to cry out. This is like someone coming before a judge and pleading and saying, These are the laws of the land. This is what you as a judge swore that you would protect and uphold.

So please protect and uphold it. This is the land that you're over as a king. And we know that your heart as a king is for justice and goodness. And so please come and act according to your heart.

This is not someone coming before God and asking for vengeance. But someone coming and asking for God to make things right. It's calling in an airstrike when you're surrounded by enemies who are shooting at you.

If you're in that situation, you can pray that those people who are shooting at you would repent and turn away and stop it. It's also good and right to pray that God would come and rescue. And so that's what we're seeing here in this psalm.

So we see that Jesus coming doesn't do away with imprecatory psalms. Our next question is, what do we do with imprecatory psalms?

[19 : 18] When do we pray them? For example, if you're in an argument with your spouse, do you turn to verse 9? For there is no truth in their mouth. Their inmost self is destruction.

Their throat is an open grave. They flatter with their tongue. The answer is no. This psalm has particular colors and shades and circumstances as we've talked about.

And it gives us the grid that we use. So we're going to go back. I started at verse 10. We're going to jump back to verses 4 and 6. And then verses 9 and 10. When do we pray this psalm?

We have to run it through a grid. We run it through the grid of these verses. We pray this psalm when we're facing evildoers who speak lies and are bloodthirsty. In other words, these are people who are trying to kill.

Most likely, David is praying this psalm about people who are actually trying to end someone's life. Verse 9. Their throat is an open grave.

[20 : 25] David is praying this psalm about people who are actually trying to end someone's life. There are many psalms that we can pray in all kinds of situations. This psalm is for people who have reached an extreme level of wickedness.

I'll give you some examples. Actually, we've already seen an imprecatory psalm in the book of Nehemiah. It went by really quickly. But in chapter 4, Nehemiah prayed an imprecatory psalm against the people who were trying to destroy the work of the wall.

So if you were with us during Nehemiah, you may recall that we met a man named Sanbalat and a man named Tobiah and a man named Geshem. And a group called the Ashtodites. And all of these people were trying to attack those who were rebuilding God's wall.

So knowing that these people wanted to end their lives and destroy them, they prayed an imprecatory psalm. It's appropriate to pray an imprecatory psalm against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. These are groups who are bloodthirsty. Verse 6. It is appropriate to pray an imprecatory psalm for people responsible in the bombings in Sri Lanka, killing hundreds of folks.

[21 : 38] Some worshiping churches, some at other places this past April. It's appropriate to pray this psalm, not just against those who are bloodthirsty. But remember, this is a psalm sung by David.

So he's the king. He's representing Israel. So it's appropriate to pray this psalm against those who are seeking to destroy the church. We can pray this psalm against China as it cracks down and persecutes the church there as they seek its destruction.

We can pray it against any government that seeks to destroy the church and its witness. And then more broadly, we can pray this psalm against anyone who advocates and works to end human life. I'm not talking about Romans 13, ending of human life. I'm not talking about the state acting in its role as God's judge. I'm talking about people who are reckless, who are going about and are seeking destruction.

These are not people that are acting as the state trying to bring justice, but people who are coming out, as I said before, to kill and steal and destroy. And so we can pray in precatory psalms that God would bring his justice to bear against anyone who's seeking to destroy human life.

[22 : 55] We can also pray in precatory psalms against anyone who is working for the destruction of God's church. Because as we've seen here, that's also what's coming up against David.

He's the one representing Israel. He's representing God's people. And these enemies are coming not just against him, but against all of God's people. It's a group that he's praying against.

When we saw the other psalm of lament in Psalm 3, it's more individual. It was a lament by one person, and there was another individual who was coming after him. This would be more of what we might call a community lament or a group lament.

There is a group of people who's coming after another group. And the group here, we see in verse 11, all who take refuge in God. So there's this group of evildoers that the psalmist is praying

against.

The psalm also highlights for us there are different degrees of evil and wickedness in this world. We've seen in Psalm 1 that there are two ways to live, and only two ways. Those who follow after God and those who don't. However, among those who do not follow after God, there are some who are especially wicked.

[24 : 06] Who are bent on destruction. That's what Psalm 5 is about. It's a psalm for those who are bent on destruction. Finally, not just what it is, who we pray it for, what it is and what it isn't.

It is an appeal to God and his character. So just as I mentioned before, we're coming before a judge saying, These are the laws of the land. We're begging you to uphold them. Verses 4 and 6 is a recital of God's ways.

You are not a God who delights in wickedness. Evil may not dwell with you. He's reminding God of what he loves. In other words, the psalmist is not coming looking for revenge or vengeance.

This is not a psalm that we pray in anger. It's a psalm that we pray as we long for justice. The psalmist is not motivated here by hate.

He's motivated here by God and his glory. He's reminding God of what God loves. As I said, he's coming before a judge. He's coming before a king and saying, This is what we know that you as a judge or a king support in our four.

[25 : 16] And so please support it and be for it here in this situation. So it's justice and deliverance, not revenge and vengeance. It has to be consistent with what Jesus commanded us, that we turn the other cheek, that we love our enemies, and we pray for those who persecute us.

And so we can love our enemies. We can long for them to repent. And at the same time, ask God to bring justice if they don't. Finally, we actually have to pray.

Verses 1 and 2 were the introduction to the psalter, so they weren't actual prayers. Because every psalm we've seen after it is a prayer. That's what we see in verses 1 through 3.

The psalmist actually prays. Give ear to my words, O Lord. Verse 1, consider my groaning. Verse 3, O Lord, in the morning you hear my voice. In the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch. What does the psalmist not say? He doesn't say, In the morning I plot revenge on my enemies. He doesn't say, In the morning I get up and I check Facebook and Instagram so that I don't have to think about my enemies.

[26 : 34] He doesn't say, In the morning I bitterly rehearse all the wrong things that people have done against me. And then I get mad. He doesn't say, In the morning I rise and I get right to work because I'm the only one who can save the world and it's up to me.

In the morning I prepare a sacrifice for you and watch. The psalmist actually takes these requests to God in prayer. As I mentioned in Psalm 3, it's doing that over and over again.

It's going back to God. That is what whips up and creates and brings true and lasting faith and hope and confidence in God in our lives. Rather than working himself into a self-righteous frenzy about how he can't believe what's going on in the world, rather than burying himself in addiction and distraction, rather than taking justice into his own hands, the psalmist takes his longings for God to act and he brings them to God in prayer.

Imprecatory psalms are as simple as that. Avoiding all the temptations to fear and bitterness in the face of evil, God calls his people to come to him and to pray, to ask him for his justice and his deliverance, to ask him to act.

As I've mentioned before, when we ask God to act, when we pray for his deliverance and his justice, we don't do it because we think that we are better than other people. We don't do it because we think that we have some moral superiority.

[28 : 19] That's what protects the psalmist here from vengeance and revenge. Instead, he understands in part what we now know in full. Verse 4, You are not a God who delights in wickedness.

Evil may not dwell with you. If evil can't dwell with God, how is the psalmist able to pray to him? Verse 7, But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house.

That steadfast love is the same steadfast love that we saw in Ruth. It's God's never giving up love. The psalmist knows as he cries out to God for justice that it's only because of God's mercy that this justice does not fall on him as well.

He knows that he's not complete in his righteousness. So verse 8, he asks God to lead him in righteousness. And then he reminds us in verse 11 of what we saw in Psalm 1, All who take refuge

in you rejoice.

In other words, there's only two ways to live. We either rebel against God or take refuge in him. The psalmist understands that his standing before God is not based on his righteousness, but on God's steadfast love and his refuge.

[29 : 39] Romans 5, chapter 10, tells us that God saved us while we were still his enemies. That is, God saved us while we were verses 4 through 6 kind of people.

Maybe we weren't bloodthirsty, maybe we weren't seeking to destroy people's lives, but all of us, apart from God, were evildoers. And the gospel runs through this psalm like it does every other, that as we come to God praying for his justice and his deliverance, we can do it only because he brought his justice and his deliverance and he poured out his judgment on Jesus.

I mentioned before that Psalm 2 is quoted more than any other psalm in the New Testament, and it's talking about Jesus as the great king. And remember that Jesus is the great king not just in his power but also in his humility.

In coming to die, to live as a man in this world, in real time, in real space, living a perfect life without sin, the opposite of being an evildoer from verse 5, and then instead of receiving the life that he deserved because of it, he took death on our behalf and defeated it for us.

He was the one who took the judgment that's called for in verse 10. It says, Make them bear their guilt, O God. For the righteous, those are people for whom Jesus has borne our guilt.

[31 : 07] And so as we pray for justice, we know that what we're praying for is what we deserve apart from God's mercy and his grace towards us. It's something that we pray only because of our faith in Jesus.

As I mentioned before, faith has three parts. First of all, it's knowledge. It's knowing the facts about Jesus, that he came and he died and he took the penalty for our sins. Second, it's not just knowledge but belief.

Many people know that Christians think that Jesus came and died for their sins but they don't believe it. It's believing that these things are actually true. And then it's not just knowledge and belief but also trust that we live our lives in the way that Jesus has lived his.

That we follow after him trusting in his sacrifice knowing that there's nothing that we can do to earn anything from God or prove anything to him. But instead, we thank God for his grace that he has not poured out judgment on us.

In the book of Jonah, if you're familiar with it, Jonah is a prophet who is called by God to announce destruction on the city of Nineveh. He's a reluctant prophet.

[32 : 15] He doesn't go right away. And when he finally goes and comes to Nineveh, all he does is pronounce judgment. It says in Jonah 3, verse 4, Jonah began to go into the city going a day's journey and he called out, Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown.

In other words, God's justice and judgment and destruction is coming for the city of Nineveh because of their wickedness. What does Nineveh do? What happens forty days later?

Verse 10, When God saw what they did, the people of Nineveh had repented and turned away from their sins. How they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said he would do to them and he did not do it.

And so as we pray for destruction on the wicked, this psalm reminds us also that God offers forgiveness and restoration to everyone who turns away from sin and back to him in repentance.

As we live in this world longing for justice and facing evil, if we have faith in Christ, we can take refuge in God rather than facing his punishment even though we were his enemies.

[33 : 35] And we can cry out to him that he would bring justice and judgment for us. Instead of giving in to fear or revenge, we can cry out to God and hope knowing that he is going to bring judgment often and sometimes now and finally and fully in the future.

And so that is our hope and our confidence that reminds us and propels us to come to God and to pray to him. I invite you to pray with me now. Father in heaven, we are so grateful that you know what it's like in this world.

You know what it's like because you know everything and you also know what it's like because you sent your son to live here and walk to face evildoers and to be willing not to receive your rescue when he called out.

And so we ask that you would remind us of our hope and that you would work it deep in us, that you would help us to come to you and to pray to you when we face injustice and destruction in this

world.

That you'd protect us from the temptations to bitterness and revenge and envy. And instead, we would have the hope that comes from knowing that you love us and you've sent your son not only to die for us, but to give us life.

[35 : 03] And so we ask it in his name. Amen.