

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

### **Enemies (praying when you are opposed)**

(Psalm 55)<sup>1</sup>

Study #8

**Sermon Series:** Learning to Pray

(Studies in selected Psalms)

#### **Introduction: The gospel of nice...**

Just so you'll know, I'm long past the point of blaming any personal character flaws on my family of origin. At this point in my life, I "own" all my flaws. I'm not proud of them, but they're all mine.

However, while I don't blame parents or society for who I am today, the home in which anyone grows up indelibly marks him or her - for good or ill. And that's as true for me as it is for you.

So, when I was about ten years old and my mother said to me, "*Your dad is a 'peace at any price' kind of man.*", it resonated. It just sounded right.

It sounded right because, based on what I had seen in my home, from both father and mother (they were both fine people, by the way) I already firmly believed that conflict was bad and was to be avoided.

I believed that it was important to keep things pleasant. I believed that I should always be "nice", keep the peace.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a Psalm of King David. It is referred to as a "maskil", a Hebrew term that appears in the heading of about a dozen Psalms. The sense of the word seems to encourage pondering, reflecting, and thinking deeply about the content found in the Psalm where it occurs. It's a call to us, today, to think deeply.

So, to ten-year old me, "*Peace at any price*" seemed like a great way to live.

Then, a few years later, I became a Christian, and learned soon after coming to faith in Jesus, that my Savior was NOT a "peace at any price" Man.

I'm not saying that Jesus went around picking fights, but He wasn't conflict averse. He argued with those who disagreed over what was and what was not truth. He didn't back down from confrontation.

He turned over tables in the Jerusalem temple because He was angry over the abuses He saw there (John 2). He tagged Pharisees and scribes with names that, while completely accurate, weren't "nice." (Matthew 23)

In His most famous sermon (The Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7), Jesus gave His followers a reality check when He spoke about how we are to be with "enemies." The underlying message? Follow Jesus and you'll have enemies.

Our Lord had enemies. The end of His life was as painful as it was because of His enemies' hatred.

We Christians are called to follow Jesus into a life of radical love, but that doesn't mean that the Christian way is always going to be a peaceful walk into niceness.

Life is often not nice. And life with Jesus can be brutal, hard, and ugly.

Read the New Testament and you'll discover that following the most loving Man who ever lived will, from time to time, lead you into un-pleasantries and into conflict with enemies.

We're going to see the same thing this morning as we explore a Psalm that records King David's experience of suffering the pains of betrayal, injustice, and the attacks of enemies who hated him.

And this morning's look into Psalms forces us to think about a category of relationship we may not often consider: Enemies.

*Review...*

I hope that the Psalms Jeff and I have explored have helped each of us learn how to take a next step in prayer. That's why we've been in the Psalms - to learn how to pray.

The Psalms have long been the "go to" source for Christians and for Jews who want to know how to best approach God in prayer.

Over the weeks of these studies we've seen how to approach God when we are doubting or when we're thirsty (thanks, Jeff!), when the storms of life hit, when we've sinned, and when we're at a life crossroads.

Today, we find a vocabulary we can use to approach God when enemies oppose us for following Jesus.

Our Psalm for today was written by King David. And at the start, we listen as he cries out to God to listen to him.

### **A Sufferer Cries Out to God (vv. 1-8)**

#### **A Request That God LISTEN (vv. 1-2a)**

**[1] Give ear to my prayer, O God;  
And do not hide Yourself from my supplication.  
[2a] Give heed to me and answer me;**

We instantly resonate with this prayer and we understand why David would pray this. When we pray, we want to know that our words make it past the ceiling.

When Jesus was dying on the cross, He cried out, "**My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?**"

And THAT's our worst nightmare; that the God to whom we turn will turn away from us in our moment of need.

So, like a child who believes that the grown-up he's talking to has tuned him out, it's as if David grabs the Lord's face in his hands and pleads, "**GOD, LISTEN TO ME!**"

Well, God is listening. In fact, He always listens when His children pray. But, now, we're listening, too. We listen and learn that David's prayer comes from a heart in deep pain.

#### **A Sufferer Absorbed in Suffering (vv. 2b-5)**

**[2b] I am restless in my complaint and am surely distracted,  
[3] Because of the voice of the enemy,  
Because of the pressure of the wicked;  
For they bring down trouble upon me  
And in anger they bear a grudge against me.  
[4] My heart is in anguish within me,  
And the terrors of death have fallen upon me.  
[5] Fear and trembling come upon me,  
And horror has overwhelmed me.**

David is opening a window to his soul. We see what's going on there, and what's going on is *sorrow* and *grief*. His inner life is a wreck. He's a mess.

Every word in this section speaks of emotional pain. If you've been through a broken-world experience, you know what David's going through.

You'll remember what it was like when the earthquake hit and how badly you just wanted to get away. Escape was on your mind. Escape is on David's mind.

#### **A Dream of Escape (vv. 6-8)**

*Fly away (v. 6)*

**[6] I said, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove!  
I would fly away and be at rest.**

Here's a great image for when things are THAT bad. You look up, see a bird on the wing and dream of joining the bird in flight to just get away. Or try this image.

*Wander away (v. 7)*

**[7] "Behold, I would wander far away,  
I would lodge in the wilderness. Selah."**

This is less dramatic than sprouting wings.

But I wonder if you have ever had the thought, as you have left work after a particularly tough day and passed the IH-10 West exit, that you could get on that highway and just keep going. Hundreds of miles of no stop signs.

Troubles in San Antonio could be left behind by simply leaving. David's thought here is that when troubles are really serious, it can be tempting to head for the hills, build a cabin in the woods.

He's taking the idea seriously enough that he includes a "**Selah**" (*Stop and let that sink in!*) at the end.

And then, there is this more urgent image.

*Hurry away (v. 8)*

**[8] "I would hasten to my place of refuge  
From the stormy wind and tempest."**

King David wants to leave without packing. He's in a hurry to get out of Dodge to escape his suffering - and, thanks to some clues in the Psalm, we believe we know that his particular pain was the pain of personal betrayal at the rebellion of his son, Absalom. (2 Samuel 15)<sup>2</sup>

Here's what happened.

This Psalm's setting...

Late in David's reign, at a time when David would have hoped for peace in his kingdom and in his family, his son, Absalom, conspired against David, promised the Jewish people the moon, and **[2 Samuel 15:6] stole away the hearts of the men of Israel.**

He schemed against his father and orchestrated a political and military coup that drove King David out of the capitol city of Jerusalem.

Not surprisingly, Absalom's rebellion broke David's heart.

Then, in addition to the anguish of a son who has betrayed his trust, David also lost a good friend - Ahithophel - to the rebellion.

The Bible tells us that Ahithophel was David's personal advisor. (2 Samuel 15:12) David counted on Ahithophel for counsel. He relied on him. Ahithophel knew state secrets and David's personal secrets.

And Ahithophel sided *with* Absalom and *against* David in the rebellion. He watched from the palace as David fled the city. He turned to Absalom and gave counsel that, if it had been followed, would have resulted in David's defeat.

So, yeah, David was in pain. He has lost the crown and the throne because of the treachery of his son and his most trusted friend.

Against that background we understand a bit better the description of Jerusalem that follows.

**Evil Opponents (vv. 9-14)**

**Suffering - and the Societal Damage Done (vv. 9-11)**

*Violence and strife (v. 9)*

**[9] Confuse, O Lord, divide their tongues,  
For I have seen violence and strife in the city.**

<sup>2</sup> This Psalm is classified as an individual lament.

We can see in our mind's eye the city in turmoil. The old king, David, has been overthrown and thrown out by a wicked, upstart son. The city's soldiers, now under the command of Absalom, restored order by the sword.

But lots of the people in the city were loyal to David and didn't give in to Absalom and his faction without a fight. So, of course, this was not a bloodless coup.

*Iniquity and mischief (v. 10)*

**[10] Day and night they go around her upon her walls,  
And iniquity and mischief are in her midst.**

David's betrayers - Absalom, Ahithophel, all the co-conspirators - were busy putting a new Cabinet in place, removing David's officials, writing new laws.

And I appreciate the use of the word "*mischief*" here.

That's what happens in times of upheaval. Unscrupulous leaders get away with things they wouldn't normally.

Everything that had meant anything to David is now ruined.

*Oppression and deceit (v. 11)*

**[11] Destruction is in her midst;  
Oppression and deceit do not depart from her streets.**

David has reigned for decades and the throne is no longer his. Jerusalem had been his special stewardship and it's now controlled by another. His family meant the world to him and it was from his family that all this loss has come.

Of course, David had been opposed before, but not like this. This opposition didn't come from the usual suspects.

## **Suffering - and the Painful Personal Touch (vv. 12-14)**

*Not the usual suspects (v. 12)*

**[12] For it is not an enemy who reproaches me,  
Then I could bear it;  
Nor is it one who hates me who has exalted himself against me,  
Then I could hide myself from him.**

His life and his kingdom weren't ruined by Philistines, Midianites, Moabites, or Ammonites, but by people he trusted.<sup>3</sup>

David had always been on guard against enemies to his kingdom - which was really God's kingdom. He never thought it was necessary to watch out for his son or his best friend.

*A friend (vv. 13-14)*

**[13] But it is you, a man my equal,  
My companion and my familiar friend;  
[14] We who had sweet fellowship together  
Walked in the house of God in the throng.**

David raised Absalom in his home. He worshipped God with Ahithophel. They have both betrayed him, along with enough soldiers and statesmen to drive him out of Jerusalem into the wilderness.

We understand his pain. And, given his pain, we even "get" why he wrote the next words of this Psalm.

**An imprecation:** The Psalmist prays *against* his enemies (v. 15)

**[15] Let death come deceitfully upon them;  
Let them go down alive to Sheol,  
For evil is in their dwelling, in their midst.**

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<sup>3</sup> We understand why there is often a tie-in between this Psalm and Jesus' betrayal by Judas Iscariot. One manuscript of Jerome's Latin Vulgate titles this Psalm, "*The voice of Christ against the chiefs of the Jews and the traitor Judas.*"

Here, David prays what we call *imprecations* on those who have opposed and betrayed him, because they have, by extension, opposed and betrayed God's purposes.

The word - *imprecation* - is used to describe these negative statements as they are found in the Bible, especially in the Psalms. But to pray an imprecation is not to engage in something magical. It's not an incantation from a book of spells.

No, David was making a request of God to bring judgment on someone who had unjustly wronged him AND who had opposed God.

Normally, we think of prayer as praying *for* someone, David here prays *against*.

I don't know all that the lines of verse fifteen mean, but it's serious, not benign, not nice. It involves praying that his enemies will be surprised by a sudden, unexpected death.

As we conclude this morning, I'll have a bit more to say about what we, today, might DO with imprecations. But I do want to make a couple of comments here.

*About imprecations...*

First, Psalm 55:15 is not a "one-off." It's not unique.<sup>4</sup> So don't be surprised when, in reading your Bible - in the Psalms and elsewhere - you come across similar statements.<sup>5</sup>

There are a very few Psalms where imprecations are a major part of the Psalm, but most include only one verse or one line.

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<sup>4</sup> We've already seen one imprecation today in verse 9: "***Confuse, O Lord, divide their tongues***" a prayer from David that God would do to his enemies what He did thousands of years earlier at the Tower of Babel when those rebels staged a coup against God on the plains of Shinar. (Genesis 11)

<sup>5</sup> See Moses' blessings and cursings (Deuteronomy 11), Jesus' prayer for the establishment of God's kingdom - which implies the destruction of the world's kingdom (Matthew 6), and Paul's words, [***1 Corinthians 16:22***] ***If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.***

But just so you'll know, imprecations are a real thing and they show up in at least twenty of the Psalms.<sup>6</sup>

Second, the imprecations we find here in Psalm 55 and elsewhere don't envision someone who is wronged taking their own revenge. King David had plenty of faults - and we've seen some of them in recent weeks. But he did not have a vengeful spirit.

Twice, he refused to take his own vengeance against King Saul when he could have killed him. He refused to take vengeance on Shimei, a man who cursed him.<sup>7</sup>

By praying these prayers, David is not asking for permission to take his own revenge. He's leaving judgment in God's hands by praying.

Third, these imprecations are heart-felt prayers for the establishment and stability of God's kingdom.

Remember that in the Old Testament the kingdom of Israel was the manifestation of the kingdom of God on earth.

David was the God-anointed ruler of that kingdom. So, to overthrow David and to destabilize Israel was to fight against God.

Fourth, while there are those who disagree, I believe that these statements are inspired by God. David didn't make a mistake when he prayed them and there are positive, God-honoring truths we, who live thousands of years after this Psalm was written, can take from them.<sup>8</sup>

This is not to say that these imprecatory statements don't present us with challenges. And they're not simple to apply. So, we need to take them seriously.

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<sup>6</sup> Important examples are Psalms 35, 55, 69:22-28, 79:6, 12; 109:6-16, 19-20, 29; 137:8-9.

<sup>7</sup> David also didn't take vengeance on Abigail's husband, Naboth, who had treated his men shamefully. (1 Samuel 25)

<sup>8</sup> Some say that these words accurately record what was in the mind of a *partially* sanctified man, and that the words are, at some level, less than inspired by God. Others are bolder and suggest that the imprecations are "devilish."

And we'll wrestle a bit more with them, again, as we close. For now, let's turn back to Psalm 55 where David is still hurting. And still praying.

### **The Battle Rages (vv. 16-21)**

#### **Confidence in God's Answer to His Cries (vv. 16-18)**

*God will save/deliver (v. 16)*

***[16] As for me, I shall call upon God,  
And the LORD will save me.<sup>9</sup>***

Don't you love that. A simple statement that he's going to call on God. A simple affirmation of trust that God has his back. And, with God listening (remember verse 1), David's going to speak.

*God will hear (v. 17)*

***[17] Evening and morning and at noon,  
I will complain and murmur,  
And He will hear my voice.***

That's a commitment to keep on asking, keep on seeking, keep on knocking because God hears and because God cares.

And we also hear his confidence that God will come through for him and will "redeem" him and this terrible situation.

*God will redeem (v. 18)*

***[18] He will redeem my soul in peace from the battle which is  
against me,  
For they are many who strive with me.***

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<sup>9</sup> "Save me" - not speaking of the gift of eternal life. The reference is more likely to the *deliverance* (the root meaning of the Hebrew verb "to save") of his physical life, since he is God's anointed king.

This is David assuming (!) that God will rescue him, physically, from the physical battle he is facing with Absalom's rebellion. (Spoiler alert, God did restore David to the throne of Israel.)

So, David has cried out to God and he's confident that God will answer him. As for those who are against him, well...

#### **Confidence in God's "Answer" to the Enemies (vv. 19-21)**

*God will not ignore the sin of the wicked (v. 19a)*

***[19a] God will hear and answer them -***

The Lord knows how to deal with those who have betrayed Israel's God and Israel's king.

*The sin of the wicked (vv. 20-21)*

***[19b] Even the one who sits enthroned from of old - Selah.<sup>10</sup>  
With whom there is no change,  
And who do not fear God.***

***[20] He has put forth his hands against those who were at peace  
with him;***

***He has violated his covenant.***

***[21] His speech was smoother than butter,***

***But his heart was war;***

***His words were softer than oil,***

***Yet they were drawn swords.***

David doesn't hold anything back in these lines that describe his enemies.

There is a refusal to change. No repentance. They are committed to de-stabilizing God's kingdom by removing David. They don't fear God, so they aren't afraid to stretch out their hand against God's anointed.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Note the second "Selah" of this Psalm.

<sup>11</sup> Remember how David feared to stretch out his hand against Saul, who was God's anointed king before him.

All had been well in Jerusalem. I wasn't perfect, but it was peaceful. Absalom and Ahithophel disrupted the peace with rebellion.

Everything Absalom, the king's son, did and said appeared to be so good and right and high-minded. It was all a sham, nothing but a ploy to entice the Jews to switch loyalties from David to himself.

Ahithophel appeared to be fully aligned with David, God's anointed king. Not true. He was a counselor for hire, aligning with whoever seemed most likely to come out on top.

David concludes the Psalm with final words to us who read, about those who oppose, and of his own commitment to trust in God.

### **Final Words (vv. 22-23)**

***[22] Cast your burden upon the LORD and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken.***

***[23] But You, O God, will bring them down to the pit of destruction; Men of bloodshed and deceit will not live out half their days.<sup>12</sup> But I will trust in You.***

And that is Psalm 55. It is a tremendous resource to turn to when you are opposed for following God.

It is a Psalm that has greatly encouraged Christians who are suffering persecution. It is faith-affirming and it gives us the vocabulary we need when we are suffering due to opposition from enemies.<sup>13</sup>

But many Christians have been - and it is possible that any of us might be - so taken aback by the imprecatory lines in this Psalm that we don't see the Psalm for the treasure it is.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Some see this statement of imprecation as a prophecy based on the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. I am inclined to agree.

<sup>13</sup> Jesus quoted Psalm 69 when He cleansed the temple; Peter quoted Psalm 109 when he presented a plan for replacing Judas Iscariot; Paul quoted Psalm 109 in Romans 15 when he urged strong Christians to bear the weaknesses of the weak.

<sup>14</sup> One author wonders if most of the qualms about the imprecations comes from Christians live in comfort, security, and affluence, while the imprecations were written by believers suffering unprovoked, naked aggression and exploitation.

So, I'd like to take some time here at the end to think about them.

- Are we to pray imprecations?
- Would it even be Christian to do so?

Chief among the reasons some have problems with the imprecations is Jesus - both His teachings and His life.

*Imprecations, today...*

### **Jesus' teaching and example**

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, ***[Matthew 5:39] "...whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."*** Right after that, He went on to say, ***[Matthew 5:44] "...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."*** (also Luke 6:27-28)

Then, at the end of His life, while He was nailed to the cross, He prayed what He preached - ***[Luke 23:34] "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."***

No imprecations. No requests from God to judge those who treated Him unjustly. Instead, a prayer that His tormentors would receive the grace of forgiveness.

### **Stephen**

Not long after this, persecution of Jesus' followers began to get serious with the stoning of Stephen in Jerusalem.

In Acts 7, we read the intense speech Stephen gave to the Jews who had rejected Jesus. He accused them of being stiff-necked and of always resisting the Holy Spirit. Stephen wasn't shy and he didn't run from confrontation.

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Point well taken. And, despite our uneasiness about them, we should note that these imprecatory Psalms (or, better, Psalms that have imprecatory elements) are among the most frequently quoted Psalms in the New Testament.

But when the crowd turned its wrath on Stephen and began stoning him, he spoke not one angry word. No imprecations.

Instead, right before he died, just like Jesus, Stephen prayed, **[Acts 7:60] “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!”**

Again, grace. Forgiveness.

And this is consistent with the reports I read on a regular basis from the ministry of Voice of the Martyrs.

### The voices of the martyrs

I’m not suggesting that every persecuted believer in Jesus prays forgiveness for those who torment them and their loved ones. Many, most of them probably struggle to forgive and against bitterness.

But when you expose yourself to the stories of our persecuted family, you meet people who, like Stephen, love like Jesus did.

- **Ibrahim** - a believer in Yemen, who has suffered for Jesus, including by the kidnapping and beating of his son by Islamic extremists. He says that he loves Muslims and he wants Muslims to know that Christians love them.
- **Abdu** - a Syrian man who was taken hostage by ISIS and endured horrible beatings. Abdu says, *“I should love even my enemies who kidnapped me. God can judge them; I will love them.”*
- **Susanna** - a Christian in Malaysia whose husband was abducted and does not know today if he is alive or not, says, *“From the beginning, I have decided to forgive them because they know not what they do, and I follow the example of our Lord Jesus Christ.”*
- **Alice** - a Nigerian woman whose husband was killed by Boko Haram militants is committed to loving the terrorists.

And then there was Richard Wurmbbrand, a faithful Romanian pastor and the founder of the Voice of the Martyrs ministry, spoke often of how fervently he and his fellow Christians prayed for their prison guards.

He wrote in Tortured for Christ, *“It was strictly forbidden to preach to other prisoners. It was understood that whoever was caught doing this received a severe beating. A number of us decided to pay the price for the privilege of preaching, so we accepted their [the communists’] terms. It was a deal; we preached and they beat us. We were happy preaching. They were happy beating us, so everyone was happy.”*

What amazing faith and faithfulness.

By listening to these reports and by reading the teachings and the examples of Jesus and Stephen, I conclude that when we are suffering at the hands of someone who is opposing us for our faithfulness to God, the best thing we can do is to pray for them, love them, and forgive them.

Not that it’s necessarily wrong for Christians to pray imprecations...

### The martyrs of the Tribulation Period (Revelation 6)

In the last book of the Bible (Revelation, chapter 6), we’re taken to a scene in heaven where Christians who had been killed for their faithfulness to Jesus are crying out to God that He would **“judge and avenge”** their deaths.

These believers have suffered unjustly, and their cry for God to right that wrong is righteous. It is right for the wrong to be righted.<sup>15</sup>

There’s nothing wrong with the prayer that those martyrs pray.

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<sup>15</sup> Bible scholar Michael Heiser says that God allows us to “vent” to Him in prayer, but not to take our own vengeance.

God doesn't want us to deny our strong, negative feelings. And He doesn't want us to act them out by taking our own vengeance. Instead, He graciously allows us to "vent" to Him in prayer.

But here's a suggestion for a strategic use of imprecation that I believe will bring great glory to God.

When we are opposed for our faithfulness to Jesus, we can use imprecation against our real enemy, not the victims of our real enemy.

### Imprecations for our real enemy

Christians have always been opposed for their faith. Today, Christians are opposed for their faith in lots of places around the world. They stand to lose everything for standing for Jesus.

Lots of students of American culture observe that we are living in an increasingly hostile-to-faith land. It is reasonable to expect that we may someday experience similar opposition for our faith.

When we do, we will need to recognize that those who oppose us are not the enemy.

- The person who may oppose the morality the Bible prescribes is not the enemy.
- The person who may write a law that limits our freedom to speak out about Jesus is not the enemy.
- The editorialist who may criticize our ethics is not the enemy.
- The member of another religion who will object to us when we proclaim that Jesus is the only way is not the enemy.

These are victims of the lies of the real enemy. Our fight is not against flesh and blood.

There is a remarkable scene in Perelandra, the second book in C.S. Lewis' Space Trilogy where Ransom (the Christ figure in the book), saves the Planet Venus from an Earth-like fall into rebellion by hand-to-hand battle with Satan's representative.

Ransom fights ferociously, realizing during the fight that he has finally discovered that the holy purpose of hatred is to hate evil with a perfect hatred.

So, we will save our imprecations for the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.