

Psalm 83

How to deal with your enemies?

Notes from a Sermon Preached at Christ Church Liverpool

It may surprise you to hear this but we live, I think, in an age of great politeness. Now while you pick you jaw up off the floor let me explain what I mean by that! Obviously lots of people are not at all polite – to judge by the foul words that I hear all the time from the other guys in the gym and the changing rooms. And those of us who deal with teenagers will know that they too are far from polite to adults.

Mind you the following saying is attributed to Plato, who lived nearly 2,500 years ago and is certainly an old saying even if it's not his: *"What is happening to our young people? They disrespect their elders, they disobey their parents. They ignore the law. They riot in the streets inflamed with wild notions. Their morals are decaying. What is to become of them?"* Which perhaps tells us as much about adults as about young people?!

What I mean is not that people are polite in everyday life but in public life. The insults our politicians trade are feeble and anaemic most of the time and even the best ones are not exactly awful. So Jay Leno said of George W Bush that *"he says he works out because it clears his mind. Sometimes just a little too much."*

Harsh. But not exactly damning. It certainly doesn't have the bite of Winston Churchill, 70 years ago, who famously got embroiled in a bitter conversation with Lady Nancy Astor: *"Sir, if you were my husband, I would poison your drink"*, she said. *"Madam, if you were my wife, I would drink it."* Churchill replied. Back in the C19th they were even ruder. General McCellan said about Abraham Lincoln that *"He's nothing more than a well meaning baboon"*. But my personal favourite was Victorian Prime Minister Disraeli, when asked to define the difference between a misfortune and a calamity. *"If Gladstone [his arch political opponent], fell into the Thames,"* he replied *"that would be a misfortune. If anybody pulled him out, that, I suppose, would be a calamity."*

I just can't imagine any politician saying that today! I wonder if the fact that we are so used to a nice veneer of civility between public figures at least partly explains why we find Psalms like Psalm 83 so difficult.

The idea that anybody should call down vengeance, judgment and divine wrath on their enemies is just not the kind of thing we are used to hearing. It seems politically incorrect, harsh and even offensive to our 21st century ears.

But, although I think that we do need to realise that part of the problem we have with these Psalms is with our culture – and the way we tend to hide the realities of the world behind nice words and the comforting distance from us to the TV screen – I don't want to minimise the real problem that Psalms like this present us with.

Because there's no doubt that the things that Psalmist is praying for here are violent and even brutal. So in v9 he pleads with God to do to enemies what *"you did to... Sisera"*. Which sounds innocuous enough – until you go back to the book of Judges and read that Sisera was killed when a young lady drove a tent peg into his forehead with a wacking great hammer while he was asleep.

Such ideas make us shudder – and the idea of us, or any other mere man or woman, praying that God would inflict such things on other men or women seems disturbing and distinctly un-Christian.

Well if you find these Psalms difficult or disturbing let me assure you that you are not alone. And I hope that you'll let me show you, from the text of this Psalm, that the desire of the Psalmist is not some sort of Mafiosi personal vendetta or a Hollywood gore-fest, but rather for a great and wonderful thing that our world needs more than it needs anything else – the revelation of the glory of God.

Let's turn to the Psalm then in a bit more detail. It's arranged in what is sometimes called a chiasm – that is with parallel sections teaching us parallel points:

Structure of Psalm 83

V1-3 Asaph prays about God's enemies

V4 God's enemies speak

V5-8 Who God's enemies were

Sealah

V9-11 Who God's enemies are

V12 God's enemies speak

V13-18 Asaph prays about God's enemies

That's not usually a way we deal with texts in English so we're going to take the similar bits together – starting in the middle of the Psalm and working outwards in both directions.

If that doesn't make any sense at all don't worry about it – I hope that all will become clear as we go along!

In this Psalm then there are really three themes, three things the Psalmist wants us to learn:
Who God's enemies are
What God's enemies say
And how God's people should pray.

1 Who God's enemies are – the peoples of the world (v5-8 & 9-11)

The idea of God's enemies will be so familiar to you if you are a regular reader of the Bible that it, no doubt, just trips off the tongue. But I want to invite you to pause with me for a moment and think about just what an odd idea that really is...

That God, the almighty, ruling, reigning creator of the entire universe should have enemies. What sort of bizarre or perverted person would even begin to imagine that they could effectively oppose one with so much power?

The arrogance required, the sheer ego needed, to even start to think that you can stand against God is almost mind-blowing isn't it?

God is so powerful – who would be foolish enough to be his enemy? But not only that. God is not merely a mighty deity. He is a righteous deity. He is the one who supports the cause of the weak and the oppressed. The one who loves justice. The one who hates slavery.

The wickedness, the sheer evil involved in wanting to fight such a God is absolutely incredible. God is so good – who would be awful enough to want to be his enemy?

Well the answer is found in these verses. Much ink has been spilt trying to find a time in the history of Israel when all the nations listed here – Edom, Ishmael, Moab, the Hagarites (who sound like they should be in Harry Potter), Gebal, Ammon, Amalek, Philistia, Tyre and Assyria. But it can't be done. There was hardly a period in history when all these nations existed at the same time, let alone attacked Israel simultaneously.

But the Psalmist isn't thinking of one particular incident. Instead what he is doing is looking back down the years from his own day – which was probably the time of the power of Assyria – back to the earliest beginnings of the nation and seeing that there has always been great opposition to God from all the nations.

The list of nations covers not only the sweep of history but also the sweep of geography – between them they form a ring round the land of Canaan – God's land is encircled by enemies.

And it always has been. Right back in the time of the Judges, just a couple of generations after the land was given by God to Israel the Midianites, v9, invaded and had to be repelled. Their princes – Oreb, Aeeb, Zebah and Zalmunna were routed.

And before that even Sisera and his army attacked and many of his troops had to die before he gave up the battle against God.

Who are God's enemies? The nations of the world. Now of course that doesn't mean that every nation is always equally opposed to God. 19th century Britain was a much more friendly place for the gospel than 20th century Russia or 21st century Saudi Arabia.

But human beings, organised together under human leadership, will always tend to use their power to exalt themselves and oppose God. It's the nature of power in a fallen world. You're not convinced?

Well let me give you an example – from arguably two of the best governments there have ever been in the history of the world.

The Jewish nation of Israel gave the world a system of laws and morals about how to deal with people with justice that is now more or less universal across the whole planet.

The Roman empire was responsible, arguably, for a greater improvement in living standards for ordinary people relative to what went before, than any other period in history. It introduced public scale engineering, widespread literacy and clearer legal procedure than had ever been known before.

No doubt there was much to object to in both of them. But these are undoubtedly two of the world's great civilisations. And where do we see these two great governments, which, incidentally, largely hated each other's guts, cooperate?

In murdering God. The Jewish leadership manipulating and spinning so that the power-seeking, weak Roman governor would send Jesus Christ, the one they all knew to be the Son of God, the Messiah, to die a traitors death.

That is not to be anti-semitic or anti-Roman. These were amongst the best of people, relatively speaking! Any other people would have done just the same or worse. For the peoples of the world are the enemies of God.

That, in the end, is the great tragedy of human history. For as the nations are at enmity with God so, inevitably they also fight and destroy each other.

Even as the beach volleyball teams of Russia and Georgia faced each other at the festival of peace and sportsmanship that is the supposed place at the Olympics their fellow citizens were launching bombs and shells and maiming and killing men, women and children. What does that mean for us?

Well it means we must be rightly cynical about the idea of a Christian nation. Of thinking that by changing our laws we will ever make our people God lovers rather than God opposers. Of thinking that God is more on our side in the patterns of politics and conflict that rage around the globe than he is on Yemen's or North Korea's.

Yes some nations are better than others. Yes good laws are good. Yes it's right for us to want our country to do right.

But we must never be deluded. The power centres of the world and people with power will always tend to use it to oppose God not to glorify him. There are notable exceptions in history – men and women of God who have sought to glorify him with their positions of influence. But they are not usual.

God's enemies are the peoples of the world.

2 What God's enemies say – destroy God by destroying his church (v4, v12)

But, you may ask, how do the nations of the world oppose God? After all many of them acknowledge his existence. And even those that do not are hardly like Lord Asriel in Phillip Pullman's recently adapted for cinema novel *The Golden Compass* – arranging some sort of direct assault on heaven itself.

How is God opposed by the nations? Well the Psalmist tells us in their own words:

V4: They say, "Come, let us wipe them out as a nation; let the name of Israel be remembered no more."

Hang on a minute you say. That might be wicked – in fact what they are planning sounds suspiciously like genocide or holocaust. It's certainly a terrible thing to do to want to wipe out a nation. But it doesn't prove that these people are opposed to God does it?

Just that they hate Israel. And neighbouring nations have always tended to hate one another – look at a thousand years of history between the English and the French!

Surely it's a big leap to make to say that because Israel say they are God's people and these nations want to destroy Israel they are seeking to destroy God?

Well actually I think it isn't. Because the way that God's enemies speak, as shown to us by the Psalmist, demonstrates that they know perfectly well what they are doing. Look at v12: *"Let us take possession for ourselves of the pastures of God."*

These nations around Israel knew perfectly well what they were doing. They knew that these were the pastures of God – the land that God himself had given to Israel.

At the time of the clearest revelation of opposition to God in the history of the world the same thing happens. When the Jews and the Romans tried the Lord Jesus Christ they knew who he was claiming to be. They knew that they had no evidence of any wrongdoing on his part and plenty of evidence that his claims were true. They knew that as they led him off to the cross they were opposing God.

And the same is true today. This is nothing to do with people who want to destroy the modern nation of Israel – though that is a terribly wicked thing to want to do. Because the modern nation of Israel is not God's people.

Today the opposition of the nations to God is seen in the suppression, marginalisation and attempted destruction of the church.

How have the atheist regimes of the world tried to implement their policies? How have the Muslim nations sought to oppose the one true God? By destroying the church. By making churches illegal.

By killing pastors. By banning missionaries. Around the globe, from China to Libya, from the Maldives to Iran that is the pattern.

In our own nation the consistent strategy of the atheist intellectual elite is to marginalise and ridicule the church.

Now it has to be said that sometimes the church is ridiculous! And, of course, there is much criticism of churches, both from within and without that is right and proper. This is no an argument for never admitting that God's people have any faults – the very message of Christ teaches us that we have precisely the same faults as everyone else!

But this does mean we must not be naive. The more I talk to non-Christians the more I discover that they are profoundly mistrustful, suspicious and against the whole idea of churches. Partly for cultural, historical and person reasons yes. But partly, I am absolutely sure, simply because it is the nature of those who are opposed to God to be opposed to his people. To want to get rid of them – whether in a violent and brutal way or simply by dismissing us as irrelevant.

God's enemies are the people of the world. They express their enmity in rejecting and hating the church. So what should we do? We should pray. And the Psalmist tells us what we should pray...

3 How God's people should pray – that people would acknowledge Christ as Lord (v1-3, v13-18)

Asaph, of course, knows perfectly well that God knows everything. And he knows perfectly well that the God who rules the universe isn't ever just sitting in heaven twiddling his thumbs.

And yet he pleads with God because it seems to Asaph that, from where he is looking on the earth, the proud and arrogant enemies who hate God and his people are plotting unnoticed by God.

They are craftily, v3, laying plans against his treasured people. So he cries out – *O God do not keep silence; do not hold your peace or be still, O God! Do something Lord!* This is a terrible situation. Act. Show yourself. Sometimes, in a church like ours, where we teach, quite rightly, the sovereign knowledge and control of God – that he is the king who holds everything in his hands, who knows the end from the beginning, who is never taken by surprise and who has decided already every thing that will ever happen...

Sometimes, in a church like ours, those truths can seem like a disincentive to prayer can't they? As if we pick up an idea that prayer never affects God and only changes us – so we do it enthusiastically when we want to change and half-heartedly the rest of the time.

But the tension between God's sovereignty and prayer doesn't seem to bother the Psalmists. Sure they must have struggled with it philosophically speaking. How does prayer work in a universe where God rules?

But it didn't stop them praying. It didn't stop them telling God things he already knew. It didn't stop them crying out in anguish about things they were sure pained God much more. It didn't stop them begging God to act when they knew he always promised to act to bring about his plans for his people.

The first way we should pray like the Psalmist is passionately for God to do something. We don't know what he'll do sometimes. We don't know if his actions will make us happy or sad. But, if we love the God of the Bible at all, I hope we know that we want him to act and do things in accordance with his perfect character of love and justice.

But Asaph doesn't just pray for God to do something generically. He prays that God will do some very specific things (v13-18)

Asaph prays that God would act in judgment. There's no doubt about that. The question for us, this morning I guess, given that we have seen that God's enemies are still the nations. Given that we have seen that they still seek to destroy God by destroying his people. The question is whether we should still pray for God's judgment?

Is this prayer one that Christians should join in with? Or has something happened between then and now which means our prayer should be different to Asaph's? The answer to that question is, I'm afraid, not a simple yes we should pray this prayer or a simple no we shouldn't.

Because there are three things we need to understand in order to pray rightly about God's enemies in our own day.

The first thing we need to understand is that Asaph's prayer is not as straightforwardly about judgment as it initially appears. Look down at v16 with me. It starts off predictably enough – "Fill their

faces with shame” but then takes an unexpected turn: “that they may seek your name O Lord.”

Then in v17 he prays again for judgment but with a striking purpose in v18: “that they may know that you alone whose name is the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth.” What Asaph wants most as he prays is not judgment for people. And its not even, as we might perhaps tend to want most, salvation for people. What Asaph wants most is for God to be glorified. And he, I think, is happy for God to do anything that brings about such a result. I think Asaph knew that there were circumstances in which God would be glorified as these people repented, turned around and sought God’s name – the true God.

And I think he knew there were times when only destruction and perishing would be terribly sufficient to make enemies realise the godness of God. Asaph’s prayer is really a prayer for the glory of God not for judgment. That’s the first thing we need to understand.

The second thing we need to understand is that the very nature of the problem here – the rebellion of men and women against God – requires God’s judgment. For two reasons. Only by judging such pretensions to be god can the true God be just and true to his own character. And only by showing that he alone is God and that none who rise against him can stand will he convince arrogant people that they are not the masters of the universe they think they are.

Imagine if God pronounced no judgments. If there was no judgment of death in the world for example. Would humanity not become more and more vile and proud and arrogant? Of course we would. The very nature of the problem requires God’s judgment. It cannot be wrong for Asaph to pray for that which is necessary for God to be seen as God.

But the third and most important thing for us to understand is that the judgment of God can come to us in two ways.

It can come to us directly, as it did to Sisera and Midian and all the others. We can face the righteous anger of God who will make all those who rebel against him and his laws like a tumble-weed, like chaff, like a forest fire. And that is our natural fate – because all of us are the peoples of the world who by nature hate God and all who belong to him.

Or it can come to us through Jesus Christ. For the words that are used in this Psalm to pray for God’s judgment describe the things that happened to Jesus – shame, dismay, perishing and disgrace.

As Christians we often think about how Jesus gives us his righteousness. How he makes us right with God. Perhaps we think less about the other half of that exchange. He took the judgment. He became us, morally speaking. As the apostle Paul puts it, he was made sin for us.

Asaph was praying for God’s glory. Human pride and arrogance requires God’s judgment. That judgment can come in two ways – to us directly or onto Christ for us.

So how then should we pray for the nations?

We should pray that God will be glorified in the nations. We should know that he will be glorified in his judgment – either as people face his wrath on the last day or as they look to Jesus who became sin for them.

Look around the world. As all sorts of people and philosophies and nations oppose God what will you pray? I hope you’ll pray that people will acknowledge the goodness of God, the Lordship, the kingship of Jesus Christ.

I hope that my friends and family will do that now. That they will do it soon, before he comes, and that he will bear their shame and his perishing will have been for them.

But he will be glorified by their acknowledging him as Lord one way or another. And it is that which we, Christ’s people, must pray for above all.

We might find praying for God’s judgment culturally distasteful. It might not fit with our English ideas of polite conversation. But it is our highest duty, and should be our great joy, to pray that God would be glorified in his perfect justice...

“that they may know that you alone, whose name is the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth.”

What will you be praying, what will I be praying, this week?

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