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The Spirituality of the Psalms

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DEEPER PLACES

The Spirituality of the Psalms

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CONTENTS

Introduction	9
1. The Richness of Complexity	19
2. The Art of Dissociation	31
3. The Pursuit of Sadness	39
4. The Joy of Brokenness	45
5. Optimistic Realism	53
6. Anger Management	65
7. The Anatomy of Happiness	83
8. Creative Contradictions	91
9. The Waiting Room	109
10. The Liberation of Desire	119
11. The Happiest Man	129
12. The Rest of Worship	143
13. The Power of Debt	155
14. Joy Is Love	171
15. The Praise of Enjoyment	177
16. The Flight of Joy	185
Conclusion	195

INTRODUCTION

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord Almighty!
My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.

PSALM 84:1-2

In Search of Reality

“I feel nothing.” That is how many Christians would honestly respond when asked how they really feel about God. Beyond brief moments of inspiration and a basic underlying conviction, most people struggle to attain anything more than a remote and abstract idea about God. It is a symptom of a faith focused on concepts and propositions rather than real, personal encounter. We are children of our scientific culture, a culture obsessed with information about things. So we find our minds crammed with ideas about God, with concepts and facts about who God is and what he has done, but too often the reality of God is as remote to us as the reality of

DEEPER PLACES

black holes and supernovas. It is little wonder, then, that we have no emotional connection with these facts. They are as abstract as a mathematical equation. It is true that three plus two equals five, but I cannot summon up any passion for that truth. I cannot love an idea. I can only love a person with whom I have some experience. The Bible tells us that we can have a real relationship with the real God. In fact, this is commonly and correctly upheld by theologians to be the main purpose of human life: to know God, to glorify God, to enjoy God. The Good News is that no matter what we have or haven't done, we have access to God through Jesus Christ, who paid for all our sins. If we put our faith in him, we can become God's children.

If you have been a Christian for some time, you no doubt have heard this Good News again and again from hundreds of different angles. You probably have also been encouraged to *delight* in this message, to share it with others as the most wonderful news in the world, and even to rejoice in this message by singing songs of praise and thanks to God for what he has done. But what do you feel? Do you feel anything?

It may well be that the more you hear this message the more aggravatingly boring it becomes precisely because the only thing you feel when you hear it is the pressure to feel something you just don't feel. It can be like people continually telling you about a wonderful place but not telling you how to get there, or whether it is even possible to get there. As long as the Good News remains a matter of abstract facts, it will have little more effect on your life than your insurance policy has on the way you drive.

Great Expectations

I get the impression sometimes that a relationship with God, for many Christians, means little more than the possession of a spiritual status that gives them assurance of going to heaven when they die. In this case, being adopted as a child of God is more about knowing where one stands with God than actually knowing God himself in the relational sense. The whole thing is abstract and removed, as though the object of faith is a great contract in heaven rather than a person. Perhaps Christians tend to think like this because they have accommodated their expectations to their lack of real, personal experience. They have tried to normalize their failure to engage with God.

If we believe that Jesus has given us access to God, to be children of God and to love and be loved by God, then the clear implication is that we should *not* be content with knowing *about* God. We should not be content with anything less than knowing God with greater intimacy and more experiential engagement than we know and experience with any other person. Is such a thing possible? I imagine there is probably little within you that feels this to be in reach. You have probably accommodated your expectations to what you lack. It is difficult to live with a conviction *about* God while lacking any sense of real engagement *with* God. It is difficult to live in continual spiritual frustration, so we tend to lower our expectations and then try to justify those lowered expectations.

We will find lots of literature to help us justify our lowered expectations of God, but we won't find any in the Bible. The more we read the Bible, the harder we will have to work to maintain low expectations of God. For example, if Moses could speak with God "face to face, as a man speaks with his friend" (Exod. 33:11), how

DEEPER PLACES

can we possibly justify an expectation of a lesser experience for us now? Is God's plan regressive? Are we to believe that what we have now is less than what Moses had? The more we read the Bible, the more frustrated we will get by the gaping incongruity between what is promised to us and what we actually have. This will bring us to a crucial junction of decision, and it is here that many people take the wrong turn.

Many people make the mistake of assuming that this tension between promise and reality is something to be avoided, that they must either lower their expectations of God or convince themselves that they have something they clearly don't have. But this very tension is a crucial element in the formation of a spiritual capacity to know God. I will say more about this in the following chapters, but suffice it to say now that the common avoidance of the tension between human reality and divine promise is evidence that we may have adopted inadequate notions of the spiritual life, to say the least. If we feel compelled to lower our expectations or embrace delusions in response to this tension, it is only because the expectations we had in the first place were seriously contaminated. It is not that we can ever have too high expectations of God. The contamination of our expectations is our misunderstanding of the *process* by which we attain what the Bible promises. It is not so much *what* we expect that is the initial problem but *how* we expect to get there. The failure of bad processes so often leads to disillusionment, which in turn leads to severely stunted expectations.

Beyond Token Piety

Read the Bible and pray. That is the nutshell prescription I was given as a young Christian for building my personal relationship

with God. It is simple and achievable. You read God's Word, and you pray for yourself and others. That advice will get us started, but it won't be long before we realize that the spiritual journey, the experience of relating to God, is far from simple.

Due to the complexities of our dysfunctional hearts, we all begin our journey with God in the middle of a vast spiritual labyrinth. There is a sense of simplicity to be gained in the spiritual life, but it is not where we begin. If we make the spiritual life a simple matter of achieving goals using step-by-step processes and daily habits, it becomes more about personal achievement than real relationship. It is so easy, then, for the spiritual life to become little more than a religion of token gestures of piety that only serve to make us feel we have fulfilled our duty toward God. We should indeed read our Bibles and pray, but this advice is just too simplistic to be helpful to anyone who really wants to have a deep relationship with God.

So where do we look for an account of spirituality that is deeply relational, that is congruent with the complexities of life, that affirms the tensions of human existence, and that goes beyond simplistic and pragmatic notions of the spiritual life? To me, the answer is obvious, but not because of any brilliance on my part. It was an accidental discovery and by no means unique. The answer has always been right in front of our eyes and most probably on the tips of our tongues, if we have been a Christian for any length of time. It is contained in the book of the Bible that has been the most utilized part of Scripture (though less so in our time), the one most widely quoted (even in the Bible itself), and the one that successive generations of Bible scholars have acknowledged to be the defining example of biblical spirituality. I discovered it not initially because I was a Bible teacher but because I was a musician. I discovered a book of songs in the middle of my Bible.

DEEPER PLACES

The biblical Psalter, the book of Psalms, attracted me as a creative challenge long before I really came to understand it. It took years to understand the psalms, partly because the spirituality they portrayed is so countercultural to the spiritual environment I came into as a young Christian. With my band, Sons of Korah, I have worked for over fifteen years adapting the psalms to music and touring the world, singing them night after night. As time has gone on, I have found them doing unexpected things to me, and as a result, I have begun to understand what the purpose of this book actually is and how it can perform its function in my life.

The Trodden Path

It is always important, when interpreting a text of any type, to ask not only what it is saying but also what it was intended to *do*. What was its function? When we discover this, particularly with respect to the Bible, we discover the *meaning* of a text. The meaning of any part of Scripture is found when we discover what God is *doing* by having the text say what it is saying.

The Psalter is the most practical book of the Bible. It was not compiled just as a book to be read but as a tool to be used. For most of its history—since its final compilation somewhere after 500 BC—the contents of the book were not read by people or even read *to* people. Rather, the psalms were sung and prayed. This, I believe, is how the psalms yield their meaning. As I have discovered after many years of singing the psalms, it is by *using* the psalms that we begin to discover what they were actually intended to *do*.

The psalms show us what authentic spirituality looks like, and in this sense, they should shape our expectations of the spiritual life. The ultimate purpose of the psalms is not just to portray

authentic spirituality but to draw us into the experience of those who went before us, those whose lives were used by God to create key spiritual precedents for us to base our lives upon. The psalms belong to a corporate spiritual context in which the acts of God in the lives of people were celebrated and commemorated annually. Many psalms were either written for or preserved specifically for commemoration festivals such as the Passover, the Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of Firstfruits. In these festivals, the people sought to find God in the present by connecting with his actions in the past. The psalms were seen as something akin to tracks in the jungle cut by those who had gone before. We are not left to work out the way for ourselves. The path has been trodden down, and we are invited to walk in this path and continue where the psalm writers left off.

David and the other writers of the psalms were the pioneers of the Spirit-filled life. The Spirit of God worked in and through them to show us what we can all discover for ourselves now that the Spirit of God has been poured out into our hearts. The psalms were written not to dictate religious habits or to achieve certain ends. They are expressions of the heart written to cultivate in us the very heart that they themselves express. They are given to us to shape our innermost desires and thereby to open up our capacity to live in relationship with God.

The fact that the psalms were written as songs should serve to underline the nature of their purpose. Music is the language of the heart, and it was for this language that the psalms were written. They were written not just to tell us *about* God but to draw us into an encounter *with* God. In this sense, the psalms both exemplify and potentially impart the very thing that the rest of the Bible directs us toward as the ultimate goal of human existence: a love relationship with God in which we glorify and enjoy God forever.

DEEPER PLACES

The biblical faith is not a religion we observe in order to achieve some level of status in God's favor. Faith is a relationship to be enjoyed and cherished. It is a matter of the heart, not to the exclusion of the intellect but flowing from the heart of love to the whole being and life of the individual. And faith is not individualistic. It has as its ultimate goal the reinvigoration of true community, the full expression of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Each of the psalms was selected and incorporated into Scripture by God's providence because it exemplified the ideals and goals of the biblical faith. The psalms became the primary tool by which the ancient faith of Abraham, Moses, and David was to be passed on from generation to generation.

Earthly Spirituality

If there was ever a time to search the Bible for a portrait of authentic spirituality, it is today. Our overentertained modern minds are prone to adopt highly romanticized notions of spirituality that inevitably lead us to disillusionment. A romanticized spirituality is one that creates a context in which we would like to live rather than the situation we actually have. We can tend to think that the expression of our hearts should be just like those of the worshipers in heaven. We can have a taste of heaven now, and, in fact, we are called to be the vessels through which the kingdom comes "on earth as it is in heaven." But, again, this is not a reality we begin with. We don't live in heaven; we live on earth. We live in an imperfect world, and we begin with highly dysfunctional spiritual capacities. Just because we can and should be experiencing certain heavenly realities does not mean that we are.

The wonderful thing about the psalms is that they show us how

to begin where we are. We are not expected to begin with some heightened state of spiritual ecstasy. We can and must begin where we are. What we need is not a heavenly spirituality but an earthly spirituality that captures the present tension between what we have already and what remains unfulfilled. This is precisely what we have in the psalms.

The Purpose of This Book

To get in touch with the reality of God, we must first get in touch with the reality of our own situation. Self-realization is the first step toward any realization of the truth of things outside us. We cannot experience the reality of God while we remain in our fantasy-world cocoons.

The spiritual journey portrayed in the psalms, therefore, begins with the saddest and harshest realities of life. From here, the path winds upward into the embrace of God, and we find here a state of heart that, according to the psalms, is the ultimate state of happiness. From this happiness flows a joy that is both profound and indomitable. This is the shape of the journey we will take in this book. We will begin with a downhill descent into the valley of reality before ascending to the mountain of joy. On the way, we will visit the dominant experiences portrayed in the Psalter.

My purpose here is not to examine the Psalter itself as a piece of ancient literature. That is a valuable endeavor, and many books have been written about the psalms on that level. My intention here is to use the psalms as windows into the experiences of people—experiences that exemplify the life of faith from an inside perspective. The psalms are the expressions of people who had real interactions with a real God, and at their highest points, the psalms

DEEPER PLACES

testify to an unshakable joy that must be desired by every person. But how did they get there? What does that road look like? These are questions that the psalms answer, and, in fact, I would even suggest that when we begin to use the psalms as a guide for this journey, we are beginning to grasp the meaning of this amazing biblical book of songs.

6

ANGER MANAGEMENT

Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord,
and abhor those who rise up against you?
I have nothing but hatred for them;
I count them my enemies.

PSALM 139:21-22

Anger, of all the emotions, apart from love, must surely be the most powerful. It consumes the lives of people and drives them to go to the ends of the earth to avenge themselves. It can simmer with unabating intensity for decades and even across generations. Anger is also one of the most infectious emotions with the power to inspire great movements of people to violence and bloodshed. It is also the hardest emotion to satisfy; in fact, one could say, impossible to satisfy. The most resounding act of vengeance will not free the perpetrator from a pinch of the anger that compelled the act in the first place. The sheer power and permanence of anger is what makes forgiveness and grace the most astounding of all the virtues.

Anger is the driving force behind some of the most persistent divisions between people groups in the world today and it also lies behind many of the most grievous social problems. It causes havoc in relationships, causing the closest ties of friendship and kinship to be exchanged for enmity. For this reason, anger is the most reviled of the human emotions. It is so closely associated with animosity and injury that it is often seen as something to be suppressed. But anger, like every other human emotion, cannot be sated or extinguished by suppression. It must be guided; channelled in a direction that will tame its fury. Anger itself is no evil. It is an emotion; and emotions are only messengers from the deeper realms of the heart that provide some indication of our spiritual health. They can be misinformed and misguided, but, if this is so, we should not blame the messenger for the errors of the message.

Anger is a kind of emotional pain. And just as we need pain receptors in the body, so we need them in the 'heart.' Anger is our natural response to something that we believe is not the way it *should* be. Of course, our ideas of what should be can be greatly skewed so that they bear little resemblance to reality as God so

ordered it. Anger may therefore arise when an overinflated sense of entitlement is disappointed. It may arise from the disillusionment of misguided expectations. Or it can arise in response to injured pride. In each of these cases anger is the faithful messenger of a corrupt source. This source might fuel anger into uncontrollable rage that may in turn propel us to abusive words or violent acts. But anger itself is not the problem. The problem is the source, the state of the heart, rather than the emotion that arises from the heart.

Anger is a valid response to things going wrong. In fact, when we are confronted with evil and injustice, it is the only *right* response. We would not call someone good who calmly shrugged off a gross injustice. God gets angry at injustice. He gets angry, not because he is bad, but because he is good. His anger is an essential expression of his attributes of justice and goodness. So, anger itself is not to be disparaged.

But even anger at genuine injustice can, and most often does, suffer from misdirection. It is misdirected by delusions about whose job it is, ultimately, to balance the scales of justice. Human beings might have civil responsibilities that require them to punish wrongdoing, but this does not satisfy our anger at the injustice done, because it does not exhaust the offence. It is God's sole prerogative to judge evil. And only he can exhaust the offence of injustice because that offence is rightfully and ultimately his. If I inflict punishment on a wrongdoer for the sake of personal satisfaction, I will certainly end up dissatisfied by my effort no matter how extreme it was.

By exceeding our natural prerogative, we also forego the satisfaction we naturally desire. What often happens is that, because our anger remains unsatisfied after inflicting punishment, we keep inflicting more and more punishment. In other words, we seek to fulfil a natural need for justice, by doing more and

more of the wrong thing. A punishment meted out by appropriate authorities, with appropriate boundaries, may be *just* (in a relative sense) but it will provide no personal satisfaction to those who are aggrieved by the evil deeds of the one being punished. And harsher punishments will not provide the satisfaction we need because the problem is not with the extent of the punishment. The problem is the misunderstanding around who has ultimate responsibility, indeed the ultimate prerogative, for punishing evil. This, as I have said, is God's alone. By attempting to seize this divine prerogative for the personal satisfaction of our anger, we become as unjust as the one we are punishing. And so, we forego any possibility of relief at the pain of injustice.

In summary then, anger is valid. In the face of injustice, we are right to get angry. What matters most when we are angry is *what we do with our anger*. This is where the psalms have a lot to teach us. That the psalms give abundant expression to anger is evident even from a cursory glance over the psalter. Interestingly, perhaps tellingly, the angry psalms are the ones that people tend to be most disturbed and perplexed by. The expressions of anger in the Psalms are often so intense that many people reject them outrightly as unbecoming of the Christian virtues of love and grace. So, these 'imprecatory psalms', as they are formally called, are very often seen as expressions of a less-enlightened stage in salvation history and regarded as obsolete for Christians today. This unfortunate view is at least partly cultural in origin. We live in a world in which acts of hatred are regularly committed in the name of God, leading people to want to distance themselves from these kinds of prayers. The rejection of the imprecatory psalms is therefore understandable, but it lacks serious thought. And in what follows I shall attempt to give the imprecatory psalms the benefit of just that.

Of all the emotions, as I have said, anger must be dealt with thoroughly and healthily. Many Christians think that we must deal with anger simply by pushing it aside and replacing it with forgiveness and kindness. This would be wrong. The goal, of course, is right. But the way there is disastrously misconstrued by the popular view. It is this mistaken view that is also responsible for the outright rejection of the psalms in which anger is abundantly and vehemently expressed.

I suggest that the sheer difficulty that we encounter with the expressions of anger in the psalms promises to uncover a problem, not so much in these psalms, but within ourselves. In fact, the misunderstanding around the imprecatory psalms points to a deeper problem that I have already touched on in the earlier chapters of this book: the problem of an overly idealistic spirituality. The imprecatory psalms, precisely because of their harshness, present us with a particularly stark corrective to this issue.

Formal Hatred

The biggest problem many Christians find with the imprecatory psalms is their apparent inconsistency with the command of Jesus to love our enemies (Matthew 5:44). How can loving enemies also involve cursing them? The psalms however do involve possible examples of people praying against those whom they love. David loved Saul as is evident from the lament he composed at his death (2 Samuel 1:19ff). He had two opportunities to kill Saul but would not lift his hand against him (1 Samuel 24, 26). And yet, when Saul was pursuing him in his jealousy, David prayed some fiery imprecations against him (Psalm 35). The same is true of David's son Absalom, who sought to supplant his father as king. David loved

Absalom very much, but during the civil war he did not hesitate to pray vehemently against him (Psalm 3). These examples depend, of course, on the occasion and authorship being as traditionally supposed; but it is nevertheless easily conceivable that David might indeed have prayed these prayers against Saul and Absalom. In any case, these examples help us to conceptualise an important distinction between what the imprecatory psalms are doing and what Jesus told us not to do.

The expressions of hatred in the imprecatory psalms are what I will call ‘formal hatred.’ In these cases, the hatred is not directed against the individual person as such, but against what they *represent in a specific situation*. An ally soldier in the Second World War, for example, would have wished the destruction of the Nazi enemy, and even prayed for this. He would have hated the enemy that he shot at across the lines, but not in a personal sense. The hatred, in this case, is not motivated by personal animosity but by what the enemy soldier stood for in that formal situation, namely, the destructive ideology of the Third Reich. It is in this formal sense that the psalmist, in Psalm 139 says, “Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord, and abhor those who rise up against you?” (vs. 21). This, likewise, is not personal hatred, but hatred for what these people stood for in that situation, namely a threat to God’s people, and, therefore, to the purpose of God. In situations where people represent evil and ungodliness, formal hatred is presented, in the psalms, as a mark of godliness (Psalm 15:4).

Formal hatred is not just a feature of the Old Testament. Jesus also affirms this as a mark of commitment to God. In cases when we must choose between our faith and persecuting family members Jesus says, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their

own life—such a person cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Clearly, Jesus is not advocating personal hatred of family members. Rather he is advocating a formal hatred for what these family members stand for when they demand that we choose between them and Christ.

Personal hatred, in contrast to formal hatred, is aimed at one’s ‘neighbour,’ that is another human being considered in a personal sense. It is this kind of hatred that is strongly forbidden in both Old and New Testaments where we are told to love our neighbour (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 22:39). Jesus also made it clear, in the parable of the good Samaritan, that our neighbour might also be our enemy in the formal sense (Luke 10:25-37). So, when Jesus tells us to love our enemy, he is, in effect, saying that we should love those whom we hate as enemies. It is in this way that evil will be overcome. This is Paul’s point in Romans 12 where he tells us that we should overcome evil by showing kindness:

Do not take revenge, my dear friends,
 but leave room for God’s wrath,
 for it is written: “It is mine to avenge;
 I will repay,” says the Lord.
 On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
 if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
 In doing this, you will heap burning
 coals on his head.”
 Do not be overcome by evil,
 but overcome evil with good. (ROM. 12:19–21)

Notice here that Paul quotes from the Old Testament to support his point. This notion of showing personal kindness to enemies is not some new and novel idea that came into play with the coming

of Christ. This was always the intention of God's law and it is not contradicted by the psalms. The psalmists recognised, as Paul does, that it is God's prerogative to avenge evil and injustice. What they are doing is praying for God to fulfil his role as judge and do what he said he would do.

Anger in the Psalms

Having discussed the idea of hatred in the psalms, I turn now to the expression that the psalmists gave to their anger. The expressions of anger in the psalms are not impulsive outbursts that strafe out curses like machine gun fire. They are emotionally charged for sure, but the power of the emotions is focused like a sniper on a specific 'covenant' target. By this I mean that, while the prayers give full expression to the anger, they are not shaped by the anger alone, but by the covenant promises of judgement and vengeance on those who do evil. The imprecations (curses) of the psalms are not curses uttered for the sake of gratuitous malice. They are declarations of the covenant curses that God himself promised to balance the scales of justice.

To discuss the imprecatory psalms more specifically I have chosen two of the most extreme examples. From the following psalms it is entirely understandable that Christians would react against these expressions. They are indeed extreme, and I too find them somewhat disturbing. I shall begin with Psalm 109. The psalmist begins with a complaint to God about certain people who had unjustly attacked and accused him. He goes on to pray the following words:

Appoint an evil man to oppose him;
let an accuser stand at his right hand.

DEEPER PLACES

When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
and may his prayers condemn him.
May his days be few;
may another take his place of leadership.
May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow.
May his children be wandering beggars;
may they be driven from their ruined homes.
May a creditor seize all he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.
May no one extend kindness to him
or take pity on his fatherless children.
May his descendants be cut off,
their names blotted out from the next generation.
May the iniquity of his fathers
be remembered before the LORD;
may the sin of his mother
never be blotted out.
May their sins always remain before the LORD,
that he may cut off the memory
of them from the earth.
For he never thought of doing a kindness,
but hounded to death the poor
and the needy and the brokenhearted.
He loved to pronounce a curse—
may it come on him;
he found no pleasure in blessing—
may it be far from him.
He wore cursing as his garment;
it entered into his body like water,
into his bones like oil.
May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
like a belt tied forever around him.
May this be the LORD's payment

Anger Management

to my accusers, to those who
speak evil of me. (Ps. 109:6–20)

The psalm goes on in like manner. It is a fiery psalm with some harsh words but even these expressions are not the harshest in the Psalter. That honour goes to the infamous final verse of Psalm 137.

Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did
on the day Jerusalem fell.
“Tear it down,” they cried,
“tear it down to its foundations!”
Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.
Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks. (Ps. 137:7–9)

No doubt your first response to these verses will be one of horror and the feeling that this is all just out of control. Particularly disturbing, in both cases, is the cursing of the children of the evil doers along with the evil doers themselves. It is indeed very harsh, and, while I don't intend to minimize that, it is important for us to recognize some significant obstacles we have before us as we encounter these psalms. The obstacles have to do with the extreme historical and circumstantial gap between the psalmists and us today.

People in the ancient world did not think about themselves as isolated units as we do. For these people there is no separation between me and my family and tribe; what happens to me happens to them; what I do, they do. There was no sense of individuality in our modern sense. If you tripped, your whole family hit the ground. If you went the wrong way, your whole family bore the consequences. We see this occurring at a number of points in the

biblical narrative beginning with the sin of Adam and Eve (cf. also the sin of Achan in Joshua 7 and that of Korah, Dathan and Abiram in Numbers 16). While this corporate way of thinking is not a feature of our individualistic culture it is nevertheless affirmed in scripture to a significant extent. It is clearly taught in the Bible that children do not bare the *guilt* of their parents (Ezekiel 18). However, in accordance with the natural interconnectedness of the human family and the corresponding nature of corporate responsibility, children inevitably suffer the *consequences* of the sins of their fathers (Exodus 20:5; 34:7; Deut. 5:9; Jer. 32:18). The kind of individualism that characterizes our modern 'western' way of thinking is a luxury of our affluent and relatively carefree culture. While the expressions of curses upon evildoers and their families is indeed very harsh (I don't want to minimize that at all) there is nothing about this that would have shocked a person in the ancient world. This would have been seen as a customary and valid call for justice.

Then there is the extreme circumstantial difference. These people lived at the coal face of the harsh realities of this broken and depraved world. We rarely get to feel the full force of this reality, but our experience is unusually privileged in contrast with the vast majority of people who have lived on this planet. The expressions we read in these psalms did not arise in response to petty disputes over minor offenses. The people who wrote these psalms, like most people throughout history, were regularly exposed to injustice and cruelty the likes of which we could barely imagine. It is easy for us to sit in our modern comfort and calmly suggest that the writer of Psalm 137 should have 'calmed down a bit' when these people had seen hundreds of children slaughtered by the Babylonians; when they had seen their infants tossed over the city walls and dashed

on the rocks below; when they had seen pregnant mothers ripped open; and when, as they left the city as captives, they walked along roads lined with friends and family members impaled on poles; and all along hearing their captors mocking the impotence of their God to save them. I am sorry to have to drag you through these gory details, but the harshness of these expressions needs to be understood in context of what was happening. They weren't going to 'calm down a bit.' They were angry, and they expressed their anger by calling for God to do to their enemies what they just did to them. That's what is happening here. They are calling for "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." That's justice (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21).

Justice and Grace

There is tendency among Christians to think that Jesus did away with retributive justice, as is expressed in the eye-for-an-eye maxim. They see Jesus replacing justice with grace. But this is not at all the case. Jesus did not do away with justice. Justice is an attribute of God and can no more be swept aside than the reality of God himself. Justice is good. Jesus Christ *fulfilled* justice, that is, the just requirements of God's law against which we had sinned. He did this so that grace and forgiveness could be extended to humanity. Justice is good, but it won't serve to redeem and restore the world. Only grace can do that. And grace doesn't come at the expense of justice. Grace is built on justice. Sin has dire consequences that *must be suffered*, and the consequences of your sin *were suffered* by Christ on the cross. As a result, you can be forgiven, and when you accept this, "the promise is to you and your children" (Acts 2:39); because God doesn't separate you from your children.

One of the great fallacies about grace and forgiveness is this idea that they replace justice; that the feeling of anger you have when you suffer some terrible injustice needs to be immediately replaced with calm feelings of love and kindness. Certainly, we should immediately respond to evil with grace, but we must also deal with our anger. Forgiveness is not as simple as we imagine it to be. Forgiveness is a process, even a struggle. Grace comes, not from us naturally, but *through a process of interaction with God*. This brings me to the key point that I want to make in this chapter. This process of interaction with God, from which grace arises, involves the very process we see in the imprecatory psalms.

You may wonder what the above quoted psalms have to do with forgiveness and grace. It is true that they don't express grace, but that is not the point of these expressions. The point of these expressions is to express anger. As I said, we certainly should act graciously to those who wrong us, despite how we feel, but this simply is not sustainable unless we also pour out the anger that burns within us. Our anger must come out, but it also must come out in the right way, otherwise it will continue to fester and compound within us.

Vengeance

There is a healthy way to deal with anger and an unhealthy way. We have a very strong tendency, in our anger, to want to take the place of God as judge. In accordance with this tendency we choose to hold on to our anger and seek vengeance to satisfy ourselves. Not only does vengeance not satisfy our anger but, more importantly, this isn't our prerogative.

The psalmists understood that the law of God expressly forbids personal vengeance. They understood that vengeance is God's

exclusive divine prerogative (Deuteronomy 32:35: “It is mine to avenge says the Lord”). In their prayers against evil-doers they are taking their grievances to God and calling for *Him* to bring the vengeance that injustice necessitates. Their prayers are an acknowledgement of God’s exclusive prerogative as judge. But they are also an appeal to God’s promise. God had said to Abraham: “I will bless those who bless you and those who curse you I will curse” (Genesis 12:3). The imprecations of the psalms are based on this covenant promise. They are not simply expressions of a gratuitous desire for the harm of enemies but expressions of a desire to see the promises of final justice fulfilled. This same idea undergirds the prayers of the martyrs in Revelation 6:10: “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Here in the New Testament book of Revelation we have an imprecation, a cry for vengeance. And it isn’t from cranky and vindictive people in corrupt flesh on earth. It is from glorified saints in heaven! Let it never be said that these kinds of prayers are obsolete Old Testament relics. These are prayers that anticipate the very thing that Jesus is returning to do in accordance with the promise to Abraham.

Evil will not go unpunished. We have abundant assurance of that throughout the scriptures and when this assurance is given it is often given to comfort those who are suffering injustice. This is the case in both old and new testaments. The apostle Paul, for example, draws attention to the certainty of the coming judgement to comfort the beleaguered church in Thessalonica:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord

DEEPER PLACES

Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. (2 THESSALONIANS 1:6-7)

It is important for us to know that evil will not go unpunished. Did Adolf Hitler get away with simple and easy suicide after orchestrating the unimaginable suffering and death of millions of people during the Second World War? No, evil will always get its just consequences. Always. You may perhaps be thinking: “But Isn’t the good news that God doesn’t punish sin anymore.” No, it isn’t. The good news is that people can be forgiven if they turn to God in faith and they won’t be punished because God already punished their sin in Jesus Christ. Evil still has its consequences for God’s people, it’s just that Jesus *bore those consequences*. That is precisely what is so staggeringly amazing about what Jesus did. He didn’t just let us off; he took the just punishment in our place.

Praying Out Anger

Anger is a fact of life. People will hurt you; you will suffer injustice. And if *you* don’t, people who you should care about *are*, and it should upset us; it should make us angry. You are allowed to be angry. But it is of utmost importance, for your sake as well as for the sake of others, that you *deal with your anger in a healthy way*, that is, in a way that will bring some resolve in your heart, and peace to your situation. Take your anger to God and exhaust it there. And if your anger is misinformed or misdirected then there is no better place to correct this than in the light of God’s presence. By opening our hearts before God to let our anger out we also open our hearts to let the light of his truth shine on our grievances. And if they are misconceived, then all the better for having brought them to God. But if they are valid grievances, we can be comforted by the fact

that the situation is in God's hands. This act of relinquishment, and only this, is what can satisfy our aggrieved hearts in the face of injustice. We must therefore bring our anger into conversation with God. We must pour it out in all its fullness in His presence and give it over to Him. And God will reciprocate in this conversation with assurance, consolation and the strength to forgive.

In the imprecatory psalms we get to eaves drop on very honest and fiery conversations with God by people who experienced the most extreme forms of evil. They are taking their anger to God, lest they be tempted to take things into their own hands. The psalmists, in the imprecatory psalms, are giving the right to take vengeance over to God. These psalms are enshrined in scripture as an example to us of what we must do with our anger. They are honest expressions of how people felt. These kinds of psalms are not static expressions of timeless ideals. There are other psalms that do this. Imprecatory psalms, however, along with other kinds of psalms of complaint, are doing something different. They are showing how we can get to those ideal states-of-being. In the imprecatory psalms, *process* is everything. The process is gritty for sure. But this process is also deliberate. The psalmists are always guided by God's law and drawn by God's promises. But ultimately, they are simply and honestly crying out to God, and there are no limitations on this.

this is an
EXCERPT

from Dr Matthew Jacoby's book

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The Spirituality of the Psalms

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