

## CALL and RESPONSE

### *Psalm 94*

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#### INTRO

(my own prayer of vengeance)

Okay, if you felt a little awkward - a little uncomfortable - during that prayer ... maybe a little bit like, "Evan you should probably see a counselor..." Don't worry, I'm okay ... we can keep going.

Part of what I prayed there was me just trying to get your attention... But I was doing more than just trying to get your attention. My prayer followed a very similar format and tone to the Psalm we're going to be reading this morning ... Psalm 94.

And maybe that gives you a sense of relief like, "*Oh good, Evan doesn't actually feel that way .. he was just referencing else. Whew.*" OR maybe it does just the opposite - maybe it gives you a sense of panic like, "*Oh ok, Evan wasn't actually saying that .. which means the Bible was saying that. Now I kinda wish it were just Evan saying it ..*"

Either way, you're not alone in your discomfort. I think we all feel a bit of a twinge, a bit of tension inside us when we hear something so raw and so blunt. Welcome to the Psalms. That's the idea we've been coming back to these last three weeks or so ... the pure honesty, vulnerability, and unedited-ness of these "prayers" that we find in the book of Psalms.

We've heard Eugene Peterson's perspective on the Psalms and his understanding of prayer. He says, "*[Prayer] is the means by which our language becomes honest, true, and personal in response to God. It is the means by which we get everything in our lives out in the open before God.*"

Another commentary described Psalms in this way: "*Often, patterns of superficial communication spill over into our talks with God. [But] this book - the Psalms - holds no cliches. The psalmists confess their sins, express their doubts and fears, ask God for help in times of trouble, and praise and worship him.*"

"Patterns of superficial communication spill over into our talks with God." I love that line. One, because it's just so well-said. But two, because that really hits close to home.

Do you ever find yourself - just in everyday life - in those patterns of *superficial communication* with others? Definitely not speaking from personal experience or anything here ... but you're at the grocery store checking out and you stroll up to the cashier and ... as a nice person you say, "Hi, how are you doing today?" And the cashier says, "I'm doing well ... how are you?" And then I say in response, "Good, how are you doin'?" (eek)"

Right? Superficial communication.

Or even better ... and again, not from personal experience ... it's your birthday and someone comes up to you and says, "Hey! Look who it is, happy birthday!" And excitedly I say, "Hey thank you, you too! (eek)"

Superficial communication.

And whether we realize it or not, it spills over into our prayers. I can't tell you how many times before dinner I've sat down and said, "Lord, thank you for this day ... thank you for this food we have ... bless it to our body ... Amen."

Now - there's nothing wrong with that. There is something powerful about routine and thanking God for the little things, but if I'm honest ... in that moment am I really expressing gratitude from a sincere heart? Or am I just trying to dive into that lasagna as quick as possible? Am I really communicating with God or am I just saying cliché things?

Psalm 94 holds no clichés ... so let's take a look.

## **BODY**

Now I want to show you the whole Psalm ... but just a warning it's gonna be very tiny ... that's on purpose - I don't want you to read it right now. I just want to point out something interesting about the format of this Psalm, which will help us going forward.

If you just glance at the Psalm in your Bible you'll see what appears to be kind of just one long train of thought ... but if you read a bit closer you'll notice that the Psalm actually has four parts ... four movements, if you will.

And each movement is distinguished from the other in that the author is actually *addressing* different people. Speaking to different characters...

The first 7 verses here are directed towards God. The next 4 verses are directed towards the Psalmists' enemies. Verses 12-19 are again directed towards God. And

the final 4 verses are addressed to 'self' ... as if the Psalmist is reminding himself of what he knows to be true.

Which I think is really interesting ... that the Psalmist seamlessly transitions his prayer from being directed toward God - like we're all used to - to, in the next breath, speaking to his enemies, and then speaking to himself. If nothing else, this Psalm really makes us think about *how we pray*.

### **TO GOD (v. 1-7)**

Let's go ahead and read this first section, which is directed toward God. Psalm 94:1-7.

*O Lord, the God of vengeance,  
O God of vengeance, let your glorious justice shine forth!  
Arise, O Judge of the earth.  
Give the proud what they deserve.  
How long, O Lord?  
How long will the wicked be allowed to gloat?  
How long will they speak with arrogance?  
How long will these evil people boast?  
They crush your people, Lord,  
hurting those you claim as your own.  
They kill widows and foreigners  
and murder orphans.  
"The Lord isn't looking," they say,  
"and besides, the God of Israel doesn't care."*

"O Lord, the God of vengeance, " I'd be willing to bet that for many of us ... when we sit down for our morning prayer with our warm cup of coffee and our cozy blanket in our big comfy chair ... we generally don't get things started with, "O God of vengeance!"

Right? That strikes a bit of a minor chord for those of us who are used to singing the notes of God's love, forgiveness, grace, and acceptance. So how do we reconcile this seemingly vengeful God ... with some of our favorite, memorized passages of scripture?

- For God so *loved* the world, that he *gave* His only son.
- Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you *rest*.
- Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you!

What do we do when we hold those verses and attributes of God so dear to us but then come to a passage like this? A passage that seems to paint a picture of an angry God ... a God whose power can be summoned to punish our enemies and crush them for their wrongdoing? What do we do with that?

Two things to note here:

First, we need to keep in mind that the Psalms are peeling back the curtain of the prayer life of these Israelites who are trying, figuring out how, sometimes failing ... to follow God. They're depictions of brutally honest prayer, not necessarily a theological foundation to build our house on.

But, more importantly - and even if that weren't true...

The passages of scripture that might seem to paint God as an angry, abusive source of power ... they're only uncomfortable for us ... they only feel out of place ... UNTIL you find yourself the victim of an abuser. Until you're the one suffering the punishment of someone else's anger. Until you're the one crushed under the weight of injustice.

In those moments of evil ... these are no longer awkward passages to wrestle with ... instead they become the anthem of a pure heart's longing for justice and freedom.

Throughout history ... the abused, the marginalized, the taken-advantage-of have found hope and perseverance in crying out, "How long, O Lord?"

- In the book of Exodus ... the Israelites have been enslaved by the Egyptians for years and years and years and we read this: *"The Israelites continued to groan under their burden of slavery. They cried out for help, and their cry rose up to god. God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant promise...*
  - What did that groaning and cry for help sound like? We can't be sure, but probably something very similar to, "O God of vengeance, How long, O Lord?"
  
- When innocent men, women, and children were kidnapped and sold as property as part of the slave trade, they penned what we now call "African American spirituals." Spiritual songs sung by those in the throes of slavery that brought hope and healing.
  - A famous abolitionist during the civil war, Thomas Higginson, was known for writing down some of the African American Spirituals he heard. He said "Almost all their songs were thoroughly religious in their tone ... and were in a minor key, both as to words and music."
  - It doesn't take much imagination to hear the voices of African Americans trapped in slavery singing together, "How long, How long, O Lord?"
  
- And still today, if we look around, we will see and hear many crying out, "How long, O Lord? How long will you let this go on?"

- Whether it's the mother whose child was killed ... the orphan who's been left alone to fend for himself ... the immigrant fleeing her war-torn country. They all cry out, "How long, O God of vengeance?" And rightfully so.

One scholar says, *"In the Bible, God's anger is an expression of his justice and his love for the world. God wouldn't be good if he didn't get angry at Pharaoh's evil and eventually do something about it."*

Contrary to what we might naturally feel or think ... we can actually find comfort and solace in God's righteous anger.

We don't often like to imagine God as being angry or provoked. We may even be tempted to think, "I don't want to serve *that* kind of God." But I'd challenge us to imagine it the other way around - imagine a God who *doesn't* get angry when the weak and forgotten are abused or tormented.

In any sort of committed relationship - be it a deep friendship, a marriage, parent-child relationship ... whether we realize it or not, we actually *value* the other person's anger. We admire their anger when it's on our behalf because it says to us: "This person cares about me to the extent that when I suffer, it actually makes them angry."

When God sees his creation suffer, he's moved to anger because of his great compassion and love for us. Not because he delights in rage, but because he delights in *us* and our well-being.

With that on the table, it should be said that our acknowledgement of God's anger doesn't give us permission to call forth God's vengeance and justice on anything or anyone we don't agree with or don't like.

Instead, God's anger and vengeance is aroused under certain circumstances ... and Psalm 94 makes these circumstances abundantly clear. The author pleads for God's judgment because these evil people (whoever they are...), *"...crush your people, Lord, hurting those you claim as your own. They kill widows and foreigners and murder orphans... They say ... the God of Israel doesn't care [about them]."*

On whose behalf does the Psalmist call for God's justice? We see here it's the widows, the foreigners, and the orphans. In other words, the most vulnerable and the most neglected among us. God is on the side of *these people*. The anger and justice of God is not a justice that promotes the rich getting richer, the powerful becoming more powerful, or those on top climbing even higher.

Just the opposite ... in a Teacher's famous words ... blessed are those who mourn, the meek, those who are persecuted ... *these* are the ones to whom the Kingdom of God belongs. In the Kingdom's economy - which stands in stark contrast to our world's economy - it's those held in the *least regard* by humans that are held in *highest regard* by God. The first shall be last and the last shall be first.

To summarize all of that: God's anger is a demonstration of his justice ... a justice that is *especially and primarily* for the benefit of the forgotten and weak among us.

### ***TO ENEMIES (v. 8-11)***

Let's take a look at this next movement of the Psalm ... a section that, if you remember, is directed toward the Psalmists' enemies (whoever they may be)...

*Think again, you fools!  
When will you finally catch on?  
Is he deaf—the one who made your ears?  
Is he blind—the one who formed your eyes?  
He punishes the nations—won't he also punish you?  
He knows everything—doesn't he also know what you are doing?  
The Lord knows people's thoughts;  
he knows they are worthless!*

So here we have this heartfelt message to these enemies ... The Psalmist launches this poetic tirade towards his enemies, reminding them that God is not absent, God is not passive, and God has not forgotten those that He created and sustains.

Besides that ... "*Think again, you fools*" is just one of the most classic disses ever. Can't you just imagine Luke Skywalker saying that to Darth Vader? "Think again, you fool!"

Anyway, having spent most of the sermon orienting ourselves to understand that this Psalm is a response to great evil and injustice done by some sort of enemy ... we're probably quick to be right there with the Psalmist saying, "Yeah, when *will* you finally catch on?? When *will* you finally get it??"

When the Psalmist is railing against *his* enemies, we're quick to join him as we think of our own *personal* enemies in this life - someone who hurt us, someone on the other side of the political aisle, someone who continues to do injustice. We resonate with these words as an indictment against *our enemies*...

And that's certainly part of the purpose of the Psalms ... to give us language to voice our personal difficulties and to lament well. (Pastor Susan will speak about Lament next week).

But the other side of that coin is that if we're not careful, we may - without even thinking about it - draw the line between good and evil ... where I always happen to be on the *right* side of that line and that other person always happens to be on the *wrong* side of that line.

In the story of the Israelites' Exodus from slavery in Egypt, it's comfortable and easy to put ourselves in the shoes of the oppressed Israelites and celebrate God's victory on our behalf. To rejoice in our liberation... We should do that!

It's comfortable and easy to see ourselves as David conquering Goliath and trust wholeheartedly that God is on our side. That's good!

But do we ever - even if just as an exercise in humility - read ourselves into the story, not as the oppressed ... but as the oppressor? Not as the Israelites, but as the Egyptians ... not as David, but as Goliath? Not as the Psalmist here, but as the enemy?

How might our perspective change if we read this part of the Psalm not as a means to berate *our* enemies ... But as an avenue to allow God to convict us and discipline us. In the words of last week's Psalm ... how might we let this passage, "*Create in me a pure heart, O God ... and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*"

So, with these verses in mind, I'll pose just a few questions for us to reflect on...

- What have we said to others as if God doesn't hear what we say?
- What have we done in secret as if God doesn't see us?
- How have we lived as if God does not discipline his children?
- What have we thought about as if God doesn't know our thoughts?

Again, from last week's Psalm:

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.*

### **TO GOD (v. 12-19)**

Back to Psalm 94 where the next movement of the Psalm is again addressed to God ... probably my favorite part of the whole chapter:

*Joyful are those you discipline, Lord,  
those you teach with your instructions.  
You give them relief from troubled times  
until a pit is dug to capture the wicked.  
The Lord will not reject his people;  
he will not abandon his special possession.*

*Judgment will again be founded on justice,  
and those with virtuous hearts will pursue it.*

*Who will protect me from the wicked?  
Who will stand up for me against evildoers?  
Unless the Lord had helped me,  
I would soon have settled in the silence of the grave.  
I cried out, "I am slipping!"  
but your unfailing love, O Lord, supported me.  
When doubts filled my mind,  
your comfort gave me renewed hope and cheer.*

"Unless the Lord had helped me..." Amen, right? That's a sermon in itself, isn't it?  
"Unless the Lord had helped me." I'm confident that each of us could find a moment in our life about which we'd say, "Unless the Lord had helped me ... I wouldn't have made it ... I would've given up ... I would've ... fill in the blank."

I think back in my life to 7th grade. Now, Middle School is not glamorous for anyone ... Middle school is always gonna be a little wacky ... I think we all get that (if not, just go find your 7th grade yearbook picture). But 7th grade for me was an excruciatingly difficult year in life...

To make a long story short, I was plagued with anxiety about going to school. And specifically, I was crippled by the thought of having to speak out loud in front of my class. In front of Mr. Yanny's social studies class. And that anxiety grew and grew and led me to start skipping that class - to hide in the bathroom or go to the nurse's office ... it continued to fester and I'd start skipping the class before it, too .... And then I'd skip the whole school day ... and then be unable to sleep the night before because I was so anxious.

And this huge snowball of anxiety had formed that left me unable to do much at all ... it felt like I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep, could never really relax. At least that's how I remember it feeling...

And I remember one moment in particular when I was in my kitchen and I was throwing this awful fit refusing to go to school because I was so anxious ... and I still remember to this day, through tears, saying, "Why did God make me this way? Why does it have to be me?"

And now I look back on that moment and can say, "Unless the Lord had helped me..."

It's often our lowest moments ... our darkest valleys ... that we can look back on and say, "Unless the Lord had helped me." Rarely can we do that in the moment, in the



heart of the storm ... but once we've walked *through* the 'valley of the shadow of death' and come out the other side we can look back and say, "Unless the Lord..."

I just want to give you a moment of silence to reflect ... identify a moment in life where you know you wouldn't have made it through were it not for the grace and mercy of God. And just thank him for his care, his protection ....

Amen.

### **TO SELF (v. 20-23)**

We'll wrap up with this ... the last movement of Psalm 94. And the Psalmist ends by addressing *himself* actually. Which might sound a little odd, but it isn't unlike Psalm 23 or something similar: *The Lord is MY Shepherd.*

Psalm 94 gives us a picture of a sort of holy pep talk.

*Can unjust leaders claim that God is on their side—  
leaders whose decrees permit injustice?  
They gang up against the righteous  
and condemn the innocent to death.  
But the Lord is my fortress;  
my God is the mighty rock where I hide.  
God will turn the sins of evil people back on them.  
He will destroy them for their sins.  
The Lord our God will destroy them.*

Now, much like the start of this Psalm, it ends on a bit of a sharp chord ... "*God will turn the sins of evil people back on them. He will destroy them for their sins. The Lord our God will destroy them.*"

Despite the discomfort we may feel when reading that verse ... this is actually a helpful picture of how God's anger and justice plays out in the story of the Bible. God "*turns the sins of evil people back on them.*" In other words - and this is important - God grants humans the freedom to experience the consequences of our own sin, right?

From the first pages of the Bible - in the Garden of Eden - God grants his creation the freedom to either trust our *own* judgement or to trust the wisdom of God. And from that moment on, humanity has proved over and over and over again that we often prefer to trust our own selfish ambitions before the wisdom and leadership of God.

And often, that's led to our own destruction, right? We don't have to look far in this world to find the consequences of sin ... we see it in broken marriages and nations at

war with each other and strained parent-child relationships and sickness, loneliness, insecurity ... it's all around us.

With the advancement of technology and medicine and education ... we can start to subscribe to this "myth of progress" that says the more we learn and invent and progress as a human race ... the better people we become and the better the world becomes.

But it hasn't really happened that way ... despite our technological advancements we still see the effects of sin on display in a very broken and hurting world.

God's loving kindness has freed us to chart our own course. To choose faithful allegiance to *him* or to choose a misleading self-reliance. And left to our own devices, we've got it wrong a lot of the time ... most of the time.

But right smack dab in the middle of this story ... this story of a world marred by the consequences of sin ... on a collision course with death ... right into that story steps Jesus ... proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

The Good News that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we see the author of the story step into its pages and confront those exact consequences of sin that we're talking about:

- Jesus offers good news to the poor ... telling them of their inherent worth.
- He proclaims freedom for the spiritually and physically oppressed.
- He grants healing to those physically and emotionally sick.

And on the cross ... in a world where we're all too familiar with our sins being 'turned back on us' ... familiar with experiencing the consequences of our own decisions. We look to Jesus on the cross and see that the consequences of sin have been turned on *him*.

In the words of Peter,

*He personally carried our sins  
in his body on the cross  
so that we can be dead to sin  
and live for what is right.  
By his wounds  
you are healed.*

And Jesus emerges from the grave ... having stripped sin and death of its power ... and he offers us a better way. A way that's ... not immune to the consequences of sin ... but

a way that is *filled to the brim* with hope for a day when the *whole world* will emerge from the tomb. When all things will be made new ... when all things will be made right.

So until then ... we rejoice in this truth from Psalm 94:

*But the Lord is my fortress;  
my God is the mighty rock where I hide.*