

Psalm 109

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Date: 30 December 2018

Preacher: David MacPherson

- [0 : 0 0] So, I've removed the jumper, partly because it was quite warm, but also because I was afraid that counting the llamas might have proved a distraction for you if you decided to just switch off from the sermon.
- That would have been something you might have done, but you're not going to be able to do that now. So, you'll just have to listen to the sermon, which is a much more profitable thing to do. I wonder if any of you have seen the film, and it came out about ten years ago, I guess, I Am Legend, stars Will Smith in an apocalyptic science fiction adventure set in New York.
- I'm not really that interested in the film, but what struck me was the title of it as it relates to something that we have in the psalm. That may seem very bizarre that there would be a connection. It is a somewhat stretch, I don't have to say, but the title of the psalm, or of the film, rather, I Am Legend.
- And I wonder if you had to begin that sentence and finish it. So, begin the sentence with, I Am, and then choose a word to finish that sentence.
- I wonder what word you would choose. So, I Am, how would you finish that sentence as you said something about yourself? Well, I don't imagine that many of you here would choose the word legend.
- [1 : 2 3] I'd be surprised, I'd be intrigued if you were to use that word, but I wonder what word you would use. How about concluding that sentence with the word prayer?
- I Am prayer. Now, you might say, well, that doesn't even make sense. I Am prayer. Why would I state that, or why would I finish the sentence with that word?
- But intriguingly, it is an expression that David uses in the psalm that we've read. In Psalm 109 and verse 4, the second line there, and we'll read the whole verse, and then I'll highlight the particular part that we're interested in.
- In return for my friendship, they accuse me. And then we read in the New International Version, the church Bible that we use, it says, but I am a man of prayer. You say, well, that's fine.
- That makes sense. I am a man of prayer. What is striking is, in the Hebrew, there's just two words there. Well, three words. The word but, and then two words. I prayer.
- [2 : 2 7] A real economy of language, you might say. But I prayer is what the psalmist actually writes in that verse, translated in the way of that we find it there in English.
- But I am a man of prayer. What we have here, these two words, I prayer, it's a Hebrew idiom where two nouns are placed together in apposition.
- That is, immediately next to each other, with the second noun, in a way, specifying the relationship with the first. And what David is doing, he's identifying prayer, and perhaps especially the one that he prays to, as core to his very identity of who he is.

I prayer. Or, if you are going to introduce a verb, and sometimes it's necessary to introduce a verb, you could simply say, I am prayer. As I say, when you do translate an idiom of that kind into another language, in our case, English, then you do need to fill it out a bit for it to make sense.

And, of course, it's something that the translators have difficulty with, because it's sometimes not immediately clear what the best way of introducing a verb, or what verb are you going to introduce, to do justice to what the psalmist is saying.

[3 : 46] And so, different suggestions are made. In the psalm that we read, or in the translation that we use, it is, as I mentioned, translated in the way that we read. I am a man of prayer.

So, I am a man of prayer is introduced there for it to kind of make sense. In the English Standard Version, it's translated in a different way.

It's, but I give myself to prayer. So, again, a verb is introduced, but it's not, I am a man of prayer, but I give myself to prayer. And in Sing Psalms, and we're going to sing these verses at the end, often Sing Psalms follows very closely to the NIV translation.

But here, interestingly, it doesn't. And in Sing Psalms, this little expression is translated, but I make prayer for him. And the implication being, for the one who is accusing me.

So, that's another interesting way in which an attempt is made to translate this very terse two words, I, prayer. For myself, I am drawn to the terseness of I, prayer.

[5 : 02] And this sense of prayer being so much at the very core of David's very identity, that in the circumstances that he finds himself, which we're going to be looking at in a moment, this is what he instinctively turns to, to prayer and to the one who hears and answers prayer.

I, prayer. What I want to do is I want to consider this psalm or parts of it using this expression of David, I, prayer, or I am a man of prayer, or I give myself to prayer, or I make prayer for him.

And there's a number of options that are suggested as to how it can be translated. But to use this expression as the pivot, as it were, around which everything we say revolves.

And what we're going to do is briefly consider the following. We're going to consider the circumstances that drive David to prayer, as they're described for us in some measure here in the psalm.

We're then going to think about David's response of prayer. But then also just think briefly about the character of David's prayer, the content of David's prayer, and then finally notice David's thanksgiving for answered prayer.

[6 : 20] Now, I should say that when we're thinking about the content of David's prayer, that there's a lot of material there, and we're not going to look at all of it, but just draw out one or two elements from it. But let's think, first of all, of the circumstances that drive David to prayer on this occasion.

And what we want to do is think about the attack that he's under, but also the effect of that attack on David. David is under quite vicious and concerted attack.

We read of it. He shares it with us there at the beginning of the psalm. Oh God, whom I praise, do not remain silent, for wicked and deceitful men have opened their mouths against me.

They have spoken against me with lying tongues, with words of hatred. They surround me. They attack me without cause. In return for my friendship, they accuse me. And so this is a vicious and concerted attack that he is under that has different aspects to it.

It's false. These men are deceitful. They're not saying things about David that were true. They're lying about him in their attack upon him.

[7 : 28] It's driven by hatred. It is hateful. The character of the attack is hateful. It's unjust. They attack me without cause.

And it's also perverse and cruel and disloyal. Perhaps of all that we discover about the attack, maybe the most painful thing for David would have been what he acknowledges there in verse 4.

So these are not his, you know, traditional enemies that he would have expected to oppose him, but rather these are men who he thought were his friends.

And he had shown them kindness and love and friendship. And what does he receive in return? Well, in return for my friendship, they accuse me. Just of anecdotal curiosity, the Hebrew word there translated accuse is a word from which we have our word Satan, the accuser.

And so maybe that alone kind of just emphasizes the depravity of the attack that David is subject to.

[8 : 40] Not surprisingly, this has devastating consequences upon David. And he shares those consequences with us actually as part of the prayer that he directs to God.

We need to jump to verse 22 and to 24, because though it forms part of his actual prayer as he with disarming honesty acknowledges before God where he is and how he has been impacted by this attack that he is under.

And so he shares that with God. And in sharing it with God, of course, he shares it with us. And we can discover the effect of this attack on him. Notice the language he uses there from verse 22 to 24.

For I am poor and needy. My heart is wounded within me. I fade away like an evening shadow. I am shaken off like a locust. My knees give way from fasting.

My body is thin and gaunt. I am an object of scorn to my accusers. And well, here he goes on to speak a little bit about the attack that he is the victim of.

[9 : 48] But in verses 22 and 20 to 24, he's speaking about the effect of the attack on him. I wonder if the language or the circumstances he's describing or the effect on him that he's describing resonates with you and circumstances that you have experienced, perhaps in this year that is coming to a close or at other points in your life where you've been conscious of how needy you are.

My heart is wounded. That is a common human experience to know what it is to suffer from a wounded heart. And sometimes as a result, maybe for different reasons, but sometimes as with the psalmist as a result of the hatred and the unkindness and the attacks of others upon us, my heart is wounded.

And maybe even those who are near to us let us down in one way or another as we often let them down also, it has to be said. He speaks about fading away.

He speaks about shaking off like a locust. I think the idea is of him being viewed as being of no consequence. He is so insignificant in the eyes of his attackers. He is worth nothing, worth less than a locust that you shake off your garment because it's something you don't want to be there.

My knees give way, thin and gaunt. The physical effects of the emotional and spiritual turmoil that he is experiencing as a consequence of these attacks that he is subject to.

[11 : 20] And I think we all know something of that, of how our physical well-being can be so impacted by causes that in themselves are not physical but then have a consequence in our health and in our very strength or lack of it.

Now, it may be that for you this is not your reality. And we'll thank God if you have not suffered in the measure that David was suffering and in the measure that he describes.

But there may be, it may be for you that in some measure this has been your experience. Or maybe it's the case that you can think of and know of others within your family circle or within the congregation of which you form a part or which we form a part where you can say, well, I know somebody who has suffered in that way, who has experienced that kind of pain and hardship.

And so we can pray for them. We don't only pray for ourselves when we find ourselves in such circumstances, but when we know of others, be it near to us or even as we extend our gaze beyond our immediate surroundings to the church of Jesus Christ around the world.

And we think of those who are subject to vicious and violent attack of one kind or another. And we have the opportunity and the privilege of praying for and interceding for them as they suffer, perhaps in the manner that David here is describing or in a similar manner.

[12 : 55] We are to pray for a broken world where so many suffer, be it as David suffered or in similar ways. That is our calling.

Do we do that? Do we pray for those who suffer, for those who have been attacked, for those who are subject to vicious and hatred or hateful opposition?

Will the year that is about to begin be marked for us by prayer for the broken, for the vulnerable, for those who are suffering?

Well, these are the circumstances that drive David to prayer. But then we want to notice David's response of prayer. How does David respond to hardship and brokenness?

Well, he prays. He turns to God. And that's really us focusing on these two words, translated with several words sometimes. But these two words in verse 4, or three words if you wish, but I pray.

[13 : 56] Prayer. But I, prayer. And even those first two words, but I, stand in very stark contrast to what has gone before. He's described his circumstances.

He's described the hateful attacks that he's subject to. And then you have this break. And there's this contrast, this stark contrast that begins with these two words, but I.

And I think even those two words, even that word but, speak of two striking spiritual realities in David's life and his response.

I think first of all, they speak of his hope and trust. But I. Yes, the scene is a desperate one. Yes, the attacks are vicious.

Yes, my enemies are powerful. Yes, I am suffering in a way that I didn't even imagine I would ever have to suffer. I don't really understand why it's all happening.

[14 : 53] Why the world is such a dark place. But, in the midst of all that, but I retain my hope in God. But, I am one who trusts in God and turns to God in the middle of these confusing and bewildering and painful circumstances.

But, I. I still hope. I still trust. I cling to God. I cry out to God in whom I trust. And may that be our experience.

We don't know what 2019 holds. What pain. What difficulty. What frustrations it might hold. But, our prayer is that for all of us, there would be the capacity, the God-given capacity to be able, in the midst of the darkest of circumstances, to echo the words of the psalmist here.

But I. But I. Turn to God. But I. Trust in God. So, these words speak of David's hope and trust. But, I think they also speak of, and they're very much intertwined, his decision and resolve.

As I say, very connected to his trust and hope. But, maybe introducing a slightly different element. The words, but I, point to decision and resolve in the heart and mind of David.

[16 : 19] What he's saying is, this is what I will do. I need to do something. There are many things I can't do. I maybe don't have the power to shut these people up. I don't have the power to avoid feeling the pain that their attacks cause me.

But, there is something I can do. And, I will do. And, I resolve to do. I will pray. I will turn to God. I will pray to God. That is what I will do.

That is what I can do. And, I think sometimes, maybe most times, we need to decide to pray. We need to resolve to pray. We can't just rest on the notion that somehow we'll just do it by instinct.

Now, there are times when, and we thank God for it, when instinctively we turn to God in prayer. And, that's a good thing if we do that. But, I think there are also occasions when it's necessary for us to, as it were, sit down and decide to do something.

And, decide to pray. That's what David does here. This is what I'm going to do. I pray. I will pray to God. This is what I am going to do.

[17 : 33] And, that would be a good thing for us to resolve to do in the year that is about to begin. That in every circumstance, be they happy circumstances, or be they dark and difficult and confusing circumstances, that our decision, our resolve would be to ever turn to God in prayer.

So, this is David's response to his circumstances. But, let's also notice the character of David's prayer. And, here I'm really just picking up on these, the same language there in verse 4.

But, I, prayer. And, perhaps picking up especially on one way in which those two words are translated. One, really suggestion, I suppose you'd have to call it, that is made as to how we might understand these two words, I, prayer.

And, it's the translation that is provided or suggested along these lines. But, I give myself to prayer. So, that's what you find in the English Standard Version.

But, I give myself to prayer. I think that does certainly capture something of what David is saying here. And, that language of I give myself to prayer also speaks of the character of David's prayer.

[18 : 48] And, maybe three adjectives come to mind that tie in with this expression, I give myself to prayer. It speaks of, I think, of serious prayer. It speaks of focused prayer.

And, I think it speaks of a persevering prayer. I give myself to prayer. This is not a fleeting, you know, prayer in the midst of some difficulty and then soon forgotten.

No, I give myself to prayer speaks of, as I say, a serious, focused, and persevering prayer. As I was just reflecting on that and coming to that conclusion, I couldn't help but ask myself the question, whether these adjectives describe my praying in the year that is coming to a close.

Is it serious? Is it focused? Is it persevering? And, I think, if I was honest with myself, and it's good to be honest with yourself, I couldn't honestly say that throughout the year this is what has characterized my praying to God.

That it has been serious. That it has been focused. That it has been persevering. I can't say that in the course of this year I have given myself to prayer in the way that David speaks of here in this psalm.

[20 : 00] What about you? As you look back on the year that is coming to a close. And, it's good to be honest about where we've fallen short. But, it's also important not to resign ourselves to what has been true in the past.

If it's the case, and I'm not making a judgment about you. I don't know if this is true of you. But, if it is the case that you have not been serious and focused and persevering.

That you haven't given yourself to prayer in the manner that is suggested here. Then, well, move on. Let's move on and let's resolve that in the year that is about to begin this would mark the manner in which we pray to God.

Let us, each of us, and together resolve to pray. To give ourselves to prayer. To pray in a manner that is serious and focused and persevering. But, let's move on to almost the last thing I want to mention.

And, that is what I've called the content of David's prayer. What does he pray for? Now, one possibility of what he is specifically praying for when he speaks of prayer.

[21 : 05] There in verse 4. It is suggested by another of the ways in which this little expression is translated. And, we're going to sing it in Sing Psalms. Just in a few moments. Where the suggested translation is, I make prayer for him.

So, there's an element of paraphrasing in order to try and make sense of the language in Hebrew. And, really what's been picked up on, and many seem favorably inclined to this way of understanding what's being said, is that there in verse 4 where David says, In return for my friendship they accuse me.

So, he's already noting that these people are people that he had been kind to, that he had shown kindness to, and yet it's not reciprocated. But, I pray for them. And, you can see how that would kind of make sense.

You know, I've even prayed for them. And yet, look how they treat me. Look how they respond to me. And, maybe that is what is being suggested here in this verse.

If it is the case, then it certainly casts an interesting light on what David goes on to say when he speaks in very harsh terms as he calls curses upon his enemies who refuse to repent, who refuse to acknowledge their evil and their wickedness.

[22 : 23] And, he says, well, if they will continue to behave in this manner, if they refuse to acknowledge their guilt, then may they know God's justice. And, we can say, well, we agree with that, even if we find some of what he says really very difficult to process.

And yet, as I say, if at the same time he is praying for them, then that does cast an interesting light on what he goes on to say. And, maybe it is the case. Maybe it is the case that these two things are not mutually exclusive.

We can pray for the wicked. We can pray for those who seek to do harm and damage the cause of Christ. Pray for their repentance. Pray that they would turn from their evil ways.

But, at the same time, say, but God, if they choose not to, then deal with them according to justice. May they know just reward for their evil deeds. Our desire is that they would repent.

But, if they refuse to repent, then may justice be done. These two things, I don't think, are mutually exclusive. But, perhaps, if we look to what continues in the psalm, we see that at the heart of David's prayer is actually a prayer for deliverance, for his own deliverance in the face of these enemies.

[23 : 43] And, we see that really towards the end of the psalm, when he prays very explicitly for deliverance. We read there in verse 21, This is what I ask of you.

Your help and your succor and your deliverance. And, that is what he asks of God. That's at the heart of the content of his prayer.

And, he prays with great confidence. And, we're given an indication of why he is so confident that God will answer him, even in the very language that he employs there in verse 21.

But, you, again, there's this contrast with what has gone before, when he has been speaking in such harsh terms about his enemies. And, then he turns to God. But, you, O sovereign Lord, deal well with me for your name's sake.

He's confident that God will respond, because God's honor is at stake. He is God's child, and he is being oppressed and attacked. And, so there's a sense in which God is the victim of that attack, as his people are attacked.

[25 : 10] And, so he says, for the honor of your name, for your reputation, deliver me. And, so he is confident that God will respond. He's confident that God will respond, because of the very nature of God, as he goes on to say in that verse, out of the goodness of your love, deliver me.

Why do I know that you will deliver me? Because I know who you are. I know what you're like. I know that your love is deep and rich, and extends to every, even the darkest of circumstances, out of the goodness of your love, deliver me.

He is confident that God will deliver on the basis of God's name, of God's honor, of God's nature, of his love for his people. But, then also, if we look to the very end of the psalm, we see this very touching description of God's nearness to his people.

In the very last verse, for he stands at the right hand of the needy one to save his life from those who condemn him. What a beautiful picture of God, one we can almost visualize for ourselves, perhaps in moments of difficulty and pain and confusion, to just visualize God at our right hand, at the right hand of the needy one.

I'm the needy one. Well, God is at my right hand. He's near. He's close. And so, when I cry out to him in prayer, I know that he hears. He's so close to me. He hears me. He sees what I'm going through.

[26 : 33] He understands. And so, on that basis, David is confident that he will respond, that he will deliver, and we, too, can share that confidence.

Grounded in the honor of his name, in the very nature of his character, in the nearness of his person to us. And then, finally, the psalm ends.

Well, we've looked at something that is said at the end of the psalm, but in the previous verse, there's David's thanksgiving for answered prayer. Now, the striking thing here is that David is anticipating future thanksgiving.

He's only just prayed for deliverance. He hasn't actually experienced the deliverance yet, and yet he's already anticipating how he will respond to that deliverance. There in verse 30, With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord.

In the great throng I will praise Him. When you do deliver me, when you answer my prayer, then it will be for me a cause of delight and joy to be able to acknowledge that publicly, to tell others of the manner in which you delivered me.

[27 : 37] And so he looks forward in hope and confidence to that opportunity he will have to give thanks for God's deliverance, to give thanks for answered prayer.

And as we think of David looking forward to that opportunity, maybe that's something we can also do as we look ahead to a year that is about to begin. May you as a believer, may we as a congregation, in the year that is about to begin, have multiple reasons and occasions for thanksgiving, for answered prayer in this year that is about to begin.

But I pray. But I am a man of prayer. But I give myself to prayer. May that be true of us. Well, let us pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word.

We thank you for the manner in which the reality of living in a fallen, broken world is not in any way sugar-coated for us in the Bible.

And so we read of the experience of one of your people, the harshness of his circumstances, the hatred of his enemies, the violence that he was subject to, the threats that he was experiencing, the false accusations that were leveled against him, and we could go on.

[29 : 00] That is the world we live in. We live in a broken world, populated by sinners, such as we are. And we do bad things. We say bad things. We let people down. We're disloyal.

We're so different to you. And that causes pain. It has consequences in the lives of others and often in our own lives also. And we do pray that in the midst of this world in which we live, we would know what it is to turn to you.

That we also would know with the psalmist to be able to respond, but I, but I will cling to God. But I will turn to God. But I will pray to God in the assurance and in the security and the confidence that he will deliver me, and indeed deliver those whom I pray and intercede for.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.