

## Prayer Lessons from Psalm 59

By: Dr. John Smith

Prayer is a very important part of our lives as Christians: it's the way that we communicate with God. So what is the connection between the book of Psalms and our prayers? For one thing, many of the psalms are prayers. Five of them are called prayers (Psalms 17, 86, 90, 102, 142). These are not the only prayers in the book. The word "prayer" is found thirty-two times in the Psalms (e.g. "God, hear my prayer"). More importantly, almost all of the Psalms are addressed to God (O LORD, hear me, deliver me, do such and such). Psalm 59 doesn't have the word "prayer" in it, but it is clearly a prayer. The psalms were often used as prayers, also in the New Testament. Think of Jesus on the cross: he quoted Ps 22:1 ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). Athanasius, one of the church fathers, said, "In the Psalter you learn about yourself. You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries. Moreover, whatever your particular need or trouble, from this book you can select a form of words to fit it. But the marvel with the Psalter is that the reader takes all its words upon his lips as though they were his own, written for his special benefit!"

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We have our favourite psalms. We know them from the *Book of Praise* and from other hymnals as well. They are very comforting.


There are also quite a few that we don't sing very often. They are sad, or angry, written in times of trouble. Some Psalms make us feel uncomfortable. Psalm 59 is one of them. It is a Psalm of David. He makes no bones about the fact that he is in trouble. His life is in danger (vv. 1-2), and it's not fair (vv. 3-4), because he hasn't done anything wrong. He calls on God to punish his enemies (vv. 5, 11, 13). He uses some not very nice words for his enemies (vv. 6-7). It's not a very polite prayer. Yet if Psalms is a prayer book then we can learn some lessons about prayer from this psalm too. I'd like to mention five lessons.

1. Life is not always happy and comfortable. Sometimes we go through deep struggles, trouble, turbulent times, and then we can find real comfort in a psalm like Psalm 59. How? It gives a realistic picture of life. We live in a broken world. The Form for Baptism says that "this life is no more than a constant death." Sometimes life sucks. Psalms like Psalm 59 can help us to express this to God: "Lord, where are you? Lord, this isn't right; it's not fair!" It's scriptural to pray like that. This psalm helps you to get it out, to put it into words, and you can be sure that God is listening.
2. Pray about the things that really matter to you, your struggles. Sometimes our prayers can get into a rut. We use the same words, and prayer becomes an empty routine. Now, there is nothing wrong with routine. We need many of the same things everyday, and so our daily prayers often fall into a pattern, and that's fine. It's only a problem if the


things that really matter are not prayed about. You've gone through a break-up with a boyfriend or girlfriend; you feel betrayed by someone close; you've been treated harshly and unfairly by a parent; you applied for a job you really wanted, but you didn't get it; or there's some other struggle in your life. Those are the times when you need to express yourself to God. When you feel that you can't do anything about the situation that you're in, you go to the One who can do something about it. Pray for the things that matter to you, because they also matter to God.

3. It's okay to express your feelings in prayer. The Psalms are emotional. Some of them are joyful. From Psalm 59 we learn that prayer does not always have to be joyful. It can have fear (David is surrounded by enemies who want to kill him), and anger ("Consume them, LORD!"). We learn that we can honestly express our feelings to God. In fact David is quite demanding, telling God what to do, which shows the desperate situation he's in: "God, do something!" Scripture allows us to pray like that. It's honest, personal prayer. You let God know what's going on in your life. God already knows, of course, but he wants you to share it with him. Prayer is covenantal: you have a covenant relationship with God. When you have a relationship with someone, you share your feelings with them, you open your soul to them. That takes trust, and no one is more trustworthy than God; you can share things with him that you do not dare to share with anyone else. If you don't understand why your life is going the way it is, tell God so. Sixteen times in the Psalms a psalmist asks God, "Why?" We're allowed to do that. We may not get an answer, but we're allowed to ask the question. It's a bold question. Be bold in prayer. That was true in the Old Testament, and even

more true in the New Testament. Think of Hebrews 4:15, 16: "We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are— yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."



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4. Don't let your prayers be stifled by propriety. What I mean is this: don't feel as though you always have to say things properly in beautiful church language. David did not always do that either. He prayed in Ps 59 about bloodthirsty men and snarling dogs. His tone was quite demanding; he was almost telling God what to do. This is an uncomfortable aspect of prayer, but it's also very real. When people go through hard times they ask hard questions; they challenge. Perhaps we feel uncomfortable, and we tell them, "You shouldn't say such things. It's not reverent," but then we don't help them through their feelings. It's better to tell them to bring their questions before God's throne. Point them to a psalm that can help them do that. It's better that they express their feelings to God than that they keep their feelings to themselves. Now, how far can you go with this? I would say, go as far as Scripture allows you to go, and that is further than we think. Yes, we have to be reverent—David is reverent too—but we can use strong language in our prayers, and the words don't always have to be perfect. We can ask the Holy

Spirit to sanctify our prayers, we can ask the Lord Jesus to sympathize with our prayers, and we can pray to the Father who put this Psalm in the Bible to help us pray.

5. We can ask God to take vengeance on our enemies. That's a tough one. Didn't the Lord Jesus say that we have to love our enemies, and didn't both Jesus and Stephen pray for their enemies? Yes, but let's not be too quick or too idealistic. It's important to recognize that loving our enemies is humanly speaking, impossible. We can only do that with God's grace and Spirit to change us. Jesus could pray for the Roman soldiers who crucified him. He showed perfect obedience. Stephen could pray for those who were stoning him to death because the Holy Spirit was working so mightily in his heart. We have the same Spirit working in our hearts; we have a small beginning of obedience. But we're not perfect yet. We're a work in progress. When someone hurts us, we get angry, we want to hurt them back. What do we do with those feelings? We pray. We tell God about our anger. We turn it over to him. We say, "God, I am so tempted to take revenge, to hit back, but I know that vengeance is yours, so I turn it over to you, Lord. I leave it to you to make things right." And so we let go of our anger by giving it over to God. We do that in faith. We know that God may not answer our prayer right away. We suffer and keep hurting. And that in itself is an act of love for our enemies. We don't hit back, but we pray, and we suffer, and we show mercy to our enemies. When we do that then we act like children of God. Just like us, God is also waiting. He is not lashing out in anger right away. He gives time for repentance. He shows patience with his enemies. God's mercy will not last forever.

Let me close by quoting from Article 37 of the Belgic Confession. This confession was written in a time of persecution, when God's people suffered deeply for the faith; they were treated unfairly by the highest authorities, and they longed for justice to come. Here's what it says:

The secrets and hypocrisy of men will then be publicly uncovered in the sight of all. Thus for good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to the wicked and evildoers but it is a great joy and comfort to the righteous and elect. For then their full redemption will be completed and they will receive the fruits of their labour and of the trouble they have suffered. Their innocence will be known to all and they will see the terrible vengeance God will bring upon the wicked who persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world.

So the prayer for God to take vengeance on our enemies is really a prayer for Judgment Day to come. Together with the psalmist we're saying, "Come Lord Jesus. Maranatha."



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