

Godly Anger

Psalms #6 | Nov 19, 2023 | 8:00, 9:30, 11:00 AM | Preached by Steve H



Opening

As we begin our sermon today, I wanted to start with a conversation with a guest. Earlier this week, I sat down over Zoom with one of my best friends in the world, Jay Saunders from Louisville, KY. We recorded this on Wednesday evening, but I'd like to play it for you now. Sit back and listen as we discuss some recent activities.



Zoom Interview: Jay Saunders (Pre-Recorded)*

- *Jay, welcome to TCC!*
- *These people here don't know you...(backstory)*
- *So, a few weeks ago we had an interesting conversation. You were struggling with the October 7 news about what happened in Israel with the attacks by Hamas. Can you share a little bit of what you were feeling and wrestling with?*
- *You aren't normally an angry guy. What made this different?*
- *Appreciate you sharing... I'd like to talk with our congregation and then bring you back...if that's okay.*



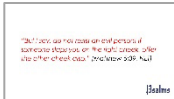
Anger and Revenge

Maybe the attacks in Israel didn't hit you like they hit Jay, but I think as you listened you recognized some of his same emotions. They live inside you, too.

- Anger
- Rage
- Revenge
- Punishment

The degree to which you feel those emotions will vary, but you feel the bristling of frustration when you are wronged. You are infuriated when you see someone else being exploited. Your wrath bubbles up and is ready to pour out on someone who hurt you or who hurt someone you love. You know how you feel when you encounter evil in real life.

As Christians, we often feel guilty about those thoughts, like the feelings are wrong or sinful. We automatically go back to verses like **this classic** to point out our mistake:



But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. (Matthew 5:39, NLT)

Those are even “red letter” words! (*Some Bibles print the words of Jesus in red to emphasize them*). “Turn the other cheek.” Jesus himself seems to oppose our drive for revenge, so we can’t wear it boldly on our sleeves when we have the emotions. Instead, we try to play it off.



We can play it off as just a joke. Culturally, there are a lot of tongue-in-cheek references to revenge that we make. In fact, we even sing about it and make it sound positive!

Think about all the songs that feature women talking about murdering bad men:

- “Goodbye, Earl” by The (Dixie) Chicks
- “If You Go Down (I’m Goin’ Down Too)” by Kelsea Ballerini
- “Gunpowder and Lead” by Miranda Lambert
- “Church Bells” by Carrie Underwood
- “Blown Away” by Carrie Underwood
- “Two Black Cadillacs” by Carrie Underwood
 - o *Side Note: We may need to talk to Carrie Underwood...*

A lot of the songs are cheery, clever, and relatable. And even the ones that sound serious seem to be more concerned with cleaning up the aftermath than wrestling with the moral implications of what was done!

We excuse it as just harmless fun. Not that we would ever do it... but we look around and then tuck away that option...just in case it gets bad enough!

So, we can treat it flippantly. Or...



We can play it off as justice. The murder stuff usually doesn’t apply to our situations, but in other situations we have a tendency to harm others and call our own punishments “justice.”

In social situations, you want to make sure your ex gets the cold shoulder from all your friends, or maybe a hot coffee spilled all over his shirt (“oops!”), and definitely getting no love from your kids.

In sports, you want to make sure your players “even the score” against someone who did a bad deed. You want your baseball pitcher to intentionally hit a batter, your NASCAR driver to seek payback against another driver for causing a wreck, your hockey player to drop the gloves and square off after a dirty hit.

The feelings exist, even if they don’t go as far as murder. We want vigilante justice in our situations, and we play it off as if it is justified and fair.

A Godly Approach

This morning, I'm not arguing against the feelings. As we've said multiple times, you can't help *feeling* an emotion. You can't always prevent anger and rage and the desire for revenge from welling up inside.

But...

Those feelings must be handled in a godly manner. We need to remember the wise counsel from Scripture:

"In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. (Ephesians 4:26–27, NIV)

"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." (Romans 12:19, NIV)

So, when we have those feelings, it seems like the Bible says that we do...nothing?!?

Not exactly. Let me introduce you to some new songs in our book of Psalms that might provide a godly way forward as we experience these raw emotions.

Imprecatory Psalms

Throughout our sermon series on the Psalms, we have been exploring the range of songs, learning to read them well, and cultivating a heart that puts their wisdom into practice. We have been exposed to different types of songs: songs of praise, songs of confidence, songs of sadness, songs of thanks. Today I want to look at a special type of song called an "imprecatory" song.

Have you heard that word before?

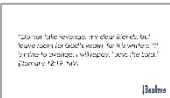
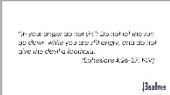
The word 'imprecate' means 'to invoke a curse upon someone or something'. The imprecatory psalms call for God to curse or judge enemies...whether ours or His. While verses of imprecation can be found in many psalms, psalms with a *theme* of imprecation include songs like:

Psalms 7, 35, 40, 55, 58, 69, 94, 109, 137, 140

In these songs, you'll find some intense language:

"May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow." (Psalm 109:8–9, NIV)

"May all who gloat over my distress be put to shame and confusion; may all who exalt themselves over me be clothed with shame and disgrace." (Psalm 35:26, NIV)



“Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; LORD, tear out the fangs of those lions! Let them vanish like water that flows away; when they draw the bow, let their arrows fall short.” (Psalm 58:6–7, NIV)

These aren’t rash words spoken in the heat of the moment; they are carefully crafted and intentionally included in the songs.

These aren’t words that someone slipped into the Bible without God noticing. God inspired ALL the psalms, including these...and Jesus quotes from these songs frequently during his ministry (ex: Psalm 69).

The imprecatory psalms, then, are here to help us learn and to handle our emotions in a godly manner. They are divinely inspired models for us as we deal with the feelings of anger and vengeance. How do they do it? Let’s look closer at one example.



Example: Psalm 83

Psalm 83

O God, do not be silent! Do not be deaf. Do not be quiet, O God.

Don’t you hear the uproar of your enemies? Don’t you see that your arrogant enemies are rising up? They devise crafty schemes against your people; they conspire against your precious ones. “Come,” they say, “let us wipe out Israel as a nation. We will destroy the very memory of its existence.”

Yes, this was their unanimous decision. They signed a treaty as allies against you— these Edomites and Ishmaelites; Moabites and Hagrites; Gebalites, Ammonites, and Amalekites; and people from Philistia and Tyre. Assyria has joined them, too, and is allied with the descendants of Lot.

Interlude

Do to them as you did to the Midianites and as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the Kishon River. They were destroyed at Endor, and their decaying corpses fertilized the soil. Let their mighty nobles die as Oreb and Zeeb did. Let all their princes die like Zebah and Zalmunna, for they said, “Let us seize for our own use these pasturelands of God!”

O my God, scatter them like tumbleweed, like chaff before the wind! As a fire burns a forest and as a flame sets mountains ablaze, chase them with your fierce storm; terrify them with your tempest. Utterly disgrace them until they submit to your name, O LORD. Let them be ashamed and terrified forever. Let them die in disgrace.

Then they will learn that you alone are called the LORD, that you alone are the Most High, supreme over all the earth.” (Psalm 83, NLT)

Exploration

That one's rough but pay attention to how this song develops.



(v. 1) The Plea

“O, God, do not keep silent; be not quiet, O God, be not still.” (Psalm 83:1)

In direct terms, the song starts with a plea for God to act:

1. **“...do not keep silent...”** – Implies that God has not acted yet. He has not made His voice known in this situation, and the songwriter wants to hear it.
2. **“...be not quiet, O God, be not still.”** – Implies that God's action, when it happens, will be sufficient. The songwriter's hope is that God's action will solve His problem.

When trying to trust God, our doubts usually revolve around one of two categories: Either God isn't working fast enough, or God just can't fix it.

The first doubt is all about divine timing. We recognize that our **calls** for action do not always align with God's **timing** for action. Even when we share a common goal with God, we often find ourselves asking (and asking, and asking) for Him to respond immediately. And sometimes asking can morph into a belief that our own timing would have been better. “God, you should have fixed this two weeks ago.”

The second doubt is all about divine willpower. We know that God is powerful, but we sometimes hold that power at a distance. God might act, but will he really make the effort *here*? Because we doubt that God will actually say “yes,” we sometimes question whether it is worth asking Him in the first place. We assume He might ignore us, so we write God off before we give him a chance.

But the opening line of Psalm 83 doesn't leave room for these doubts. Instead of “God should have...” or “God can't...”, the songwriter seems to be saying, “God will...” and “God can....”

He **will** fix everything – and if He hasn't, there must be a reason to pause. He **can** fix anything – and if He doesn't, there must be a reason not to. It won't always look the way we want, but God can and will act.



(v. 2-8) The Danger

Then we move to the danger in verses 2-8.

“See how your enemies are astir, how your foes rear their heads?” (Psalm 83:2)

Even though we trust that God will act, god-fearing people still can be overwhelmed by the evil around us. And when we face it, we don't want to face it alone.

We want God to SEE.

The songwriter puts a spotlight on the danger he faces. It's not enough just to say, "Act, God!" He wants to be absolutely sure that God understands what is happening.

The songwriter describes the enemies in this national crisis. First, he uses general terms. These enemies are:

- **Crafty** – (v. 3 – “cunning”) not to be dismissed or ignored, they have the ability to make their plan succeed.
- **Thorough** – (v. 4) goal is not just harm, but total annihilation of the nation (“destroy them”) from the present and the future (“remembered no more”).
- **United** – (v. 5 – “with one mind”) they have a singular purpose.
- **Determined** - (v. 5 – “form an alliance”) they make an alliance (lit. “covenant”) to carry this out.



Beyond the general terms, he then calls out these enemies by name. They are listed like a biblical axis of evil, a collection of “supervillains.”

- Edomites, Ishmaelites, Moabites, Hagrites, Gebalites, Ammonites, Amalekites, Philistines, people of Tyre (tyrants?), Assyrians
 - o These are nations that had opposed, fought against, and harassed the Israelites in their history.
 - o These nations literally surrounded Israel (north, south, east, west)

The list doesn't describe a historical attack – there was never a united coalition exactly like this. It may be prophetic, describing a situation yet to come (*some look at the countries listed and see connections to modern villains like Hamas and Iran*), but the importance for us today comes from seeing the mindset in Psalm 83. It shows the scope of opposition: Who is against us? Everyone is against us!

It is a perfect storm of enemies, and the songwriter makes sure that God knows exactly who He is facing. Why? Because...

We want God to TAKE IT PERSONALLY.

- The writer says these are YOUR enemies, YOUR foes (v. 2)
- They conspire against YOUR people, the people YOU CHERISH (v. 3)
- They form an alliance/covenant against YOU (v. 5)

The writer wants to be absolutely sure that God understands what is at stake, because we assume God is much more likely to act when He is personally affected. The songwriter is intentional (not manipulating, but carefully stating) as he points out how the enemies relate to God and God's covenant promises to His people.



(v. 9-18) The Appeal

Then the song moves into the imprecatory details.

*“Make them like tumbleweed, O my God, like chaff before the wind.”
(Psalm 83:13)*

Faced with enemies, wanting God to act, the songwriter gives some suggestions on what God could do. He suggests that God act in power!

Judgment

He wants judgment! The writer references God’s past actions. In verses 9-10, the songwriter calls to memory the devastating victory God provided against the Midianites during the time of the Judges. *(Check out the stories of Deborah in Judges 4 and Gideon in Judges 7-8 if you want to understand the names and historical references...or just trust me for now).* Judgment is part of the goal.

It is not wrong to hope that evil is judged! Our writer is on solid ground as he writes with the language of destruction – tempests, fires, etc.

C.S. Lewis writes about this in his book, *Reflections on the Psalms*:

“[T]he ferocious parts of the Psalms serve as a reminder that there is in the world such a thing as wickedness and that it... is hateful to God.”

It is righteous and good to want evil to be punished. God SHOULD punish rapists and kidnapers and murderers and molesters and liars and the immoral. His perfect justice requires such an opinion.

Victory

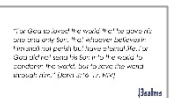
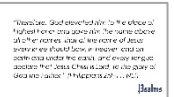
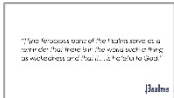
A godly opposition to evil means that we try to have God’s heart. Yet the imprecatory psalms remind us that God’s heart isn’t just to punish evil. Instead, it is a heart that pushes for victory.

In other words:

1. Goal #1 = defeat the enemies
2. Goal #2 = turn the enemies to God, help them recognize the Lord’s supremacy (“Let them know that you...are the Most High over all the earth”)

“Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Philippians 2:9–11, NLT)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” (John 3:16–17, NIV)



This second goal may make you want to vomit in your own mouth (ex: God wants to save Hamas terrorists?) But it is important. The imprecatory psalms show us that the goal isn't revenge; the goal is restoration.

God made each person valuable...including your enemies.

The boss you hate – what if she was redeemed by Christ? The neighbor who drives you crazy? What if he figured out what it means to love Jesus? Your childhood bullies? What if they asked to be baptized today?

James Adams once challenged us to ask this question:

“Are Christ’s enemies my enemies?” If they are not, you do not love the Lord as you should.

And I would go further to say that if you don't want God's goals for your enemies, you are not loving the Lord as you should, either.

He wants to punish evil, but he wants to change the evildoer as well.

The Takeaway

These songs are not a simple, vengeful cry to God, but instead a plea for Him to act in a way that protects His own purity and glory. If God is insulted by the actions of wickedness, we *can* and *should* share in a call for that wickedness to be put to an end.

But the responsibility to end evil isn't on our shoulders. You and I should not take it upon ourselves to act out our rage and anger. The imprecatory psalms remind us that our suggestions for justice are just that: suggestions. Ultimately, we need to leave it in God's hands so HE can solve it.

Closing

When we face those feelings of anger, wrath, rage, and revenge, the Bible doesn't say that we do...nothing. Instead, it allows us to share our feelings with God and others. We are free to call for the punishment of sin! But as we do so in prayer, we try to see those enemies as God sees them. We try to remember that our battle is spiritual and the real enemies aren't flesh and blood.

Before we wrap up, let me go back to my friend Jay so you can hear one man's real-world experience with these principles as he moves from his own "imprecatory" thoughts to a place of greater trust.

Zoom Interview: Jay Saunders (Pre-Recorded)*

Thanks for hanging around through that discussion. So, after your anger at the situation, what helped you work through the spiritual issues? What truths about God did you come back to?



- *What advice would you give to someone who is wrestling with those feelings of anger and vengeance and justice...on a personal or a national level?*

Thoughts

We need to be careful with the imprecatory psalms and our own imprecatory prayers. We never want to be in a position where our cry for justice hijacks us into bitterness or despair. Instead, we should trust.

When we see evil in our world, the imprecatory Psalms give us the freedom to call for God's help. We can plead for Him to act against evil – in society, or in our own hearts. We do not have to be silent or “tolerant.” We can speak firmly...as long as we completely place our trust in God to do the actions.

Then, we circle back to our brothers and sisters in Christ, leaning on them and putting the situation in God's hands.

We hold out hope that God's enemies will turn from their ways, but we ask that God's kingdom advances despite their sin.

That's how to handle those emotions.

[PRAYER]

Invitation

It's easy to see evil elsewhere, but when we see evil in ourselves, the imprecatory Psalms give us the freedom to call for God's help. We can plead for Him to act against our own rebellion. As Paul cried out in Romans 7:24-25, “Who will rescue me from this body of death? I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

We do not have to be silent or tolerant of sin in our lives. We can completely trust God to purify us. We can ask that God's kingdom advances in spite of us. We can find our own “flesh” at war with God, and then desperately hope that He wins the battle.

So let me invite you to surrender today. If you've been holding out from Him, turn to Jesus today. Come forward and confess your sins, repent and accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior, ready to follow him instead of your evil self.

We invite you to come forward and make that decision as we stand and sing.

PRAYER REQUESTS:

Notes

Anger and Revenge

We can play it off as just a joke.

We can play it off as justice.

We need a godly approach. (Ephesians 4:26–27, Romans 12:19)

Imprecatory Psalms

Psalms 7, 35, 40, 55, 58, 69, 94, 109, 137, 140

Example: Psalm 83

(v. 1) The Plea

(v. 2-8) The Danger

(v. 9-18) The Appeal (Philippians 2:9–11, John 3:16–17)

The Takeaway

(Romans 7:24-25)

Sermon Discussion ?s

Use the following questions based on today's sermon as a starting point for spiritual discussions with your family or a small group of Christian friends this week.

Fellowship—Relationship with a Purpose

- Which Biblical figure makes you angriest: Pharaoh (enslaved Israelites, murdered baby boys), Haman (tried to commit genocide against the Jews), Pilate (gave the order to crucify Jesus), Ananias and Sapphira (lied and corrupted the early church)?

Growth—Thinking About Spiritual Matters

- In situations where you are angry, are you inclined to “turn the other cheek” (Matthew 5:39) or call for justice? Why?
- If you are in charge of punishment for someone (ex: parenting, supervising at work), do you punish fairly? What factors impact your decisions?
- What situations cause you to feel anger and vengeance...either in the world or in your personal life? What aspects make you most angry? Do you think that God shares your anger at these situations?
- Read Psalm 109, especially verses 6-19. Is this a call to action, a venting of emotion, or a godly example? Explain your answer.
- The imprecatory psalms show anger toward sin. Do you share God's anger toward sin? Are Christ's enemies your enemies?
- The imprecatory psalms show a desire for the wicked to know God. Do you share God's love for all people? Do you want his enemies to switch sides?
- How do you balance anger toward sin and a desire to see the sinner reconciled?
- Based on what you've learned, are you inclined to pray imprecatory prayers, or are you still uncomfortable with them? Explain your thoughts.

Prayer – Taking Your Thoughts to God

- Pray for God to rightly judge the evil we see in our world. List areas and sins that you want punished. Pray for God's wrath to turn people away from their sins and toward Him.

*Interview Transcript

00:10:26 STEVE

Glad we could join you on zoom here today.

00:10:29 JAY

Well, thank you, Steve. I am honored to be a part of the sermon series.

00:10:33 STEVE

Yeah. Yeah. Well, you and I go back quite a ways, all the way back to what, 2001 (?) from our time in in Kentucky at Southeast Christian Church. We've remained friends ever since that and we've just been in touch all through the years. You've been a good friend, and I really appreciated having that connection to you.

Because of that connection, it's been interesting because we had a conversation recently (you and I get together a lot, right?) We had spent some time talking just about every week...

00:11:03 JAY

Yes. Yeah.

00:11:06 STEVE

... but a couple of weeks ago you were you were talking about your response to what was happening over in Israel on October 7th, when Hamas attacked Israel and everything went crazy there. You had a really strong reaction to that. And I wondered if you could kind of share some of what you were struggling with.

00:11:27 JAY

Well, so Steve, as you know, over the past 20 years of our friendship, I'm a pretty analytical guy. And so I view current events and news in much the same way. And so what originally my reaction was on the Sunday and the Monday after the attack was more of an analysis of, OK, how is this going to impact our country, my family, the world?

It was a few days later when I was looking up some different news articles and I saw images of Hamas terrorists posing with children of some of the settlers that they had just killed and I went from being an analytical to...to a pure primal rage. It was more than just anger. I sought vengeance. I wanted the Hamas terrorists to hurt, I wanted them to suffer for what they had done.

And this this is not who I am. This is not who I am on any normal day.

00:12:37 STEVE

Right, right. I was going to say, I mean, I'm introducing you to the congregation and here I am... here you are...saying how angry and rage-filled you are. Like, that's not you! That's not your normal... your normal attitude, your approach. You've always been a really kind, peaceful guy. What made this different for you?

00:12:55 JAY

Actually it was a bit of a journey to figure out why it was different and what I finally realized was the parent in me -- I'm a father of two children; they're teenagers now but I remember when they were young -- and to see children being toyed with in such a way woke within me a fatherly desire to protect them. And knowing that whatever was...what horrible things were going to happen... had happened, that turned to revenge. And so the father within me wanted those who had perpetrated this crime to feel pain and suffering for what they had done to children who had no way of defending themselves.

00:13:50 STEVE

Well, I appreciate your honesty and sharing those thoughts and those feelings, because it's real. Like, this wasn't just a staged thing that we made-up for this. This sermon... like, this was the real reaction. This was what you were really feeling. You had this long conversation about it. I know you wrestled with it a lot.

I want to take some time to talk through feelings like that and relate it back to our study on the Psalms. But then can we come back here in a minute and talk a little bit more?

OK. All right. Hang on, we'll be right back.

00:17:30 STEVE

All right, Jay. Well, welcome back. Thank you for being patient while we had our conversation and sermon time here. Just want to come back to our discussion. You had all this anger about the situation that was going on. It was all built up there, different than your normal emotions. But after all that anger, how did you work through that? How did you get back to the kind of Christian mentality that you need to have?

00:17:56 JAY

Well, Steve, it wasn't...it wasn't straightforward. And I'm not used to working my way back from anger or dealing with it to start with, but really, the very first step was talking to friends, talking to you, talking to other friends who offered Godly counsel about, "hey this this is happening and this is the right thing to do."

Secondly, I specifically asked you for prayer: to pray for me, to pray for Israel, to pray for me to be able to handle the anger.

And then I prayed myself, and I prayed through Psalm 46:10, when God answers a prayer from the sons of Korah to “be still, and to know that I am God.” And if you truly break down what that verse says, that gives peace.

And then finally I circled back around and I talked with you later, and talked with other friends about, ‘this is where I am and this is where I'm still struggling and this is where I've come to terms.’

And...and so, it doesn't go away. The anger is still there. But it is put into context. And recognizing that it really - once I turn over the situation and my anger both to God - that's what I need to do as a Christian.

00:19:35 STEVE

Yeah, yeah, I mean that's this whole idea of making sure “it's not about me.” That it's about, “it's about God” in this situation. It's not *my* feelings, *my* reaction. It's submitting that back to him. So, I appreciate that process that you've gone through and being part of that conversation early on and then hearing some of where you came from.

At the end of that, as you're still working through that, I just wonder if you -- as we kind of wrap up today in this conversation -- do you have one or two tips that you would give to our congregation if they are going through a similar struggle?

00:20:12 JAY

My first tip: Don't hold it in. Don't keep it to yourself. It was not easy to admit this to my friends. To you, Steve. But at the same time, it was real. It was within me and it was consuming me. And I needed to share.

And then secondly: Pray. Prayer works. It may not feel like it in the moment. It may not feel like it within a day, but I look back and I realize that everything that I had bottled up when I shared -- and then I asked for prayer and I prayed myself specifically -- that was when it changed for me.

I still have anger. I still weep for what happened to those babies. But I recognize this is God's. It's not for me and I am not going to go and do something dumb and and try to join the Israeli military. This is in God's hands.

Well, Jay, thank you so much for taking some time out of your evening to have this conversation with me and to share some with our congregation. We're going to wrap things up here, but thank you again for your time.

00:21:34 JAY

Absolutely. Looking forward to speaking to you again soon, Steve.

00:21:37 STEVE

All right. Thanks a lot, brother. We'll talk soon!