

God's severe judgment

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[0 : 00] An expression of unfairness, I think, then, if you flip the coin, is an expression of our deep longing for justice, for rightness in our world, for truth, for, as we're going to see the word today, for righteousness, for purity in our world and in our dealings with others.

Now, why have we a deep longing for that? Because we daily experience ourselves or we observe others experiencing the very opposite. We see people experiencing injustice, unrighteousness, impurity, lies, distortion of truth, and full-blown criminal acts.

But at the same time, I think we fear the justice and the righteousness and the purity we long for. We crave for it, but we fear it. Why would that be the case?

Because I think, inherently, we know that we ourselves are unrighteous, impure, unjust in our dealings with others, and in even how we present ourselves sometimes.

And so, I think we actually get ourselves trapped in something of a vicious cycle, craving that which ultimately we fear, because we suspect we can't bear the experience of true justice, true righteousness, true purity.

[1 : 40] And that dilemma, I think, then gets worse once we introduce the notion of God into our living. So, people commonly blame God for perceived unfairness in life's circumstances.

We see that all the time. People can ignore God for weeks and weeks at an end, but something comes up. Oh, what sort of God would allow that to happen? Why do people do that?

Well, because people believe that if there is a God, people believe and expect and demand that God would deliver righteousness and truth and justice.

That he would be the dispenser of those things in his world. But then again, we get caught in that cycle I mentioned a moment ago, because we crave God's justice applied to our world.

But then, I think, at the same time, we fear God's justice. We fear God's truth. We fear God's righteousness. We fear God's purity. Because we fear that we'll get swept up with it and swept away by God's judgment.

[2 : 58] And so, it is a dilemma for us. And Psalm 7 just jumps into this dilemma, portraying both God's fierce righteousness and, on the other hand, God's severe judgment as inseparable.

In Psalm 7, it's just been read to us by Gareth, the righteous God, the Lord, the Most High, as he's described within the psalm, is pictured here.

The picture language is that of a fierce warrior, armed to the teeth, able to dispatch his enemies just with ease, with multiple weapons of destruction.

And this warrior is not only armed to the teeth, but he's ready to dispense severe judgment to all who deserve it.

This is a God who's portrayed in righteousness and justice, whose righteousness and justice has real teeth.

[4 : 14] This God doesn't make idle threats in respect to judgment. Now, I think that's probably why we're discussing this at staff meeting this week, as we always do, a preview, looking at trying to help each other prepare for sermons.

And the consensus was that in our younger years, and even now, lots of Christians would just jump over a psalm like this. Because a mention of fierce righteousness and severe judgment, as we have here in this psalm, is just confronting.

It's uncomfortable. Perhaps even threatening. And that's also why, as we jump into Psalm 7, we need to be thinking theologically.

We need to be thinking theologically about God and the world in which we live, God's world. Now, what is the word theology? Well, theology is the science or study of God.

Theos, God, logos, words, study of. Theology is the science or study of God and his nature. So, you might be thinking already, well, why is he speaking to predominantly Christians here?

[5 : 33] Why is he telling us we need to think theologically? Isn't that a given that Christians think theologically about God? Well, I have to tell you, no, it's not a given.

It's not a given at all. So many people, and sadly, I have to say, that includes so many Christians, shape their thinking about God, not from what God has revealed about himself in his written word, the Bible, but from other sources.

Perhaps it's from circumstances and what feels right. So, it's very common, and I know those who would call themselves Christians that would say this. So, they think about God from the circumstances.

So, they'll say to me, God is in the good things of life, but he can't be in the bad things of life. That's a God who's shaped by circumstances and feelings.

Or it could be from our culture that people get their view of God. The culture always divides life into sacred and secular. That is, there's some points of life, some aspects of life, that are clearly God's domain, but then there's lots of other parts of life that are ours to shape and form and do with as we please.

[6 : 54] And the two don't really overlap. Or, more recently, people get their view of God from what's called expressive individualism.

That is, people say, well, my starting point is that I believe I'm entitled to be happy. And if there is a God, then his job is to deliver that happiness.

That's what he's about. But, you know, I don't know. Or, again, so many so-called Christians these days would call themselves, and proudly call themselves, New Testament Christians.

That is, they reject the violence of the Old Testament. Why do they reject the violence of the Old Testament? I think it's because they first rejected the notion of the fierceness of God's righteous character.

And, therefore, the severity of his righteous judgment against sin. And so, it's just downright uncomfortable for them.

[8 : 01] They don't want a God like that. They won't engage with a God like that. So, that tells me that they have in mind a God who's more like an indulgent grandfather. You know, the grandfather type who's, and I hope I'm not like this.

I don't think I am. But, anyway, the grandfather type who always approves his grandchildren's behavior, regardless of how offensive it is. But, neighbor calls out wrong against the grandchildren, but rewards wrong with lollies.

Just ignores bad behavior in the name of love. That's my job as a grandfather. So, people like that reject God if he's described in these terms as a fearsome warrior.

Judge. Someone who's deeply offended and full of wrath against sin. And who gives sin or rebellion precisely what it deserves.

Condemnation and death. Condemnation. So, there's big themes in this Psalm 7 that are confronting.

[9 : 20] And the hope and confidence of King David expressed in verse 11. God is a righteous judge and a God who feels indignation every day.

Just let that rush over you for a minute. Rush over you for a minute. God is a righteous God. And a God who feels indignation. That is, he's constantly offended by sin.

And as David tries to navigate difficult and painful circumstances of slander and injustice in his own life daily.

His hope and confidence is that God's fierce righteousness and severe judgment are inseparable. That is his hope.

That is his confidence. That is his confidence that those two must be together. If God is fiercely righteous, then he must be severe in judgment against sin. And we'll see how that plays out in David's own handling of his experience of injustice.

[10 : 35] So, what we have here is two sides of one coin. God's severe judgment is simply one expression of his fierce righteousness.

God's severe judgment. God's severe judgment. God's severe judgment. That is doing theology according to scripture. That is how God reveals himself.

Confronting and challenging as it may well be to us. So, verse 12 through to 16. We see it play out. Very clearly, the person who persists in rebellion, those who persist in rebellion, that is, despising God's authority or even daring to attack God, which is, of course, the ultimate injustice against God, the ultimate evil against God.

Those people, says the psalm, will experience God's severe judgment in their condemnation and ultimate destruction.

Now, of course, I need to stop there just for a moment because in our daily experience of life, it won't always feel like that. We look around our world and it looks as if injustice and unrighteousness is a thriving business.

[12 : 04] But, you see, that wouldn't be to assess it theologically. That would be to assess it circumstantially.

Ultimately, we're told here that however successful it appears to our eyes in the short term, evil, rebellion, sin, and injustice, evil, will be brought undone because it is self-defeating and because God is the righteous judge.

Rebels will experience, in the picture language, rebels will experience the full force of God's attacking weaponry, his sword, his sharp arrows, his strong bow to launch those arrows at great speed and with great skill and accuracy.

Now, at times, God will cut people down suddenly and without warning. But, in the verse here, there's picture language here of them digging holes and the idea of evil being described like a pregnancy that's actually staged and progressive.

So, at times, God will cut people down suddenly. But, at times, if I can use a common phrase, he'll give people enough rope to hang themselves. He'll let them loose into their own evil schemes and because evil is self-defeating, he will orchestrate it to that end and they will actually come undone in their moment of thinking they've achieved something.

[13 : 40] But, on the other hand, the person who seeks to live under God's authority, who seeks to serve God wholeheartedly, who sees God as beautiful and desirable as a place of peace and a place of refuge and as a shield, a place of contentment, those people have nothing to fear from God's judgment.

They will experience the other side of the coin the richness and blessing of God's righteousness, God's justice, God's goodness, God's mercy, God's grace.

Blessing and the good life. And here's the point, you see. The two are inseparable and here's how it works. God's judgment on sin, David realized this and we'll tease this out a little bit more in a minute, God's judgment and sin will simultaneously be deliverance for God's people because the two are inseparable.

So when God judges injustice, then his people are delivered from that injustice into justice and righteousness. Those who make God their refuge will experience the great warrior, as you see in those earlier verses there, the great warrior, they'll experience his defensive weaponry.

That is, he will be a shield to them to protect them, to keep them safe. in the midst of the awfulness of life.

[15 : 34] So friends, it's a very, very long sort of introduction here. It's a little bit more than an introduction, but we need to take this thinking with us into the second part of the psalm. Thinking theologically about God is to understand that his fierce righteousness and justice will be experienced in radically different ways according to a person's relationship with God.

I would even go further, and this one is questionable, so by all means question me on it if you think I'm taking a step too far here. I would actually argue from lots of the Psalms and from lots of the Scripture that God's character can only be most clearly seen against evil, injustice, rebellion, and sin of this world.

It's only when we appreciate one that we can appreciate the other. It's only when we've experienced injustice that we can luxuriate knowing that God will deliver justice.

Colm Buchanan has a song about it. You know, what the sinner needs most, if he's going to understand the light of Jesus, he needs to have been lost in the darkness, the blackness of night. If he wants to understand what Jesus means when he says, you've been found, then the sinner needs to understand what is to be lost. If we want to understand God's character, righteousness, goodness, purity, then we see it most clearly against the realities of our world that we rub against every day.

[17:18] And only in this huge contrast am I suggesting to you this morning that we will see truly God's beauty, God's desirability, God's reliability in a world where nothing else is stable or certain or beautiful or reliable or desirable.

Put it, in other words, going back to where I started, I would say to you that God and his righteousness is what our hearts crave. Even though we might not even realize that. We might think we crave justice, but we're actually craving something bigger than justice. We're craving the God of justice, the righteousness of God. And so my friends, rather than be embarrassed by psalms like this that speak of God's fierce righteousness and severe judgment, rather than be embarrassed, we should be glad that this is what our God is like.

Because that means our lives as we tuck in behind the Lord, if I can use that language, and trust ourselves to him, that means our lives are safe.

Ultimately safe. Our lives are in the hands of a safe, powerful, good, merciful, ever vigilant, truthful God.

[19:00] And that, my friend, is a place of contentment. And as David himself gets to in verse 17, that is a place where we just overflow in praise and thankfulness in the midst of the mess of life.

So, moving on to the second point then. Because King David is thinking theologically about God, then it means that he's also thinking theologically about experiencing injustice through slander. And that's the particular crime that he's, well, not crime, particular allegation he's facing in Psalm 7. So, he may be God's appointed king, but he has many enemies who are seeking his downfall. Psalm 7, David reflects on himself as God's slandered king. As he wrestles with a particular smear campaign launched apparently by this man called Cush, of whom we know nothing else, except that he's a Benjaminite, which means he comes probably from the lineage of Saul, not probably, he comes from the lineage of Saul, so may well have some sort of hatred of King David as the successor to King Saul.

But we don't really know any of that sort of stuff. Either way, it seems like he's orchestrated a smear campaign, and we see something of the details there of verse 2 and 3.

[20:39] David feels pursued, he feels as if his life's hanging in the bowels. There are people out there that are so savagely opposed to him that he describes them as just being like lions.

If they can get their claws into them, they will have no hesitation in ripping him to shreds. David's under pressure. In verse 4, it seems like, and again, this is only surmising, but it seems like from verse 4, the rumor circulating is that King David is just out of control.

He's a totally self-interested person with no loyalty, even to those who are his friends or those who would come to him declaring peace towards him. Even there, the suggestion is that David doesn't have any loyalty.

And maybe that's a reference to how people perceived his move to succeed from King Saul. Don't know. But that seems to be something of the nature of the rumor.

But worse than that, not only that he's self-interested, but he actually uses his power corruptly to totally exploit anybody who might oppose him.

[21:53] And it's very clear from these opening words that David feels the pain of that very, very deeply. It's character assassination.

And perhaps, and again, it doesn't say, we're just reading between the lines here in a sense, perhaps David's just so disheartened and upset that people would be so quick to believe the worst about him based on a rumor when they hadn't even tried to check if it was true.

And in verse 3, 3-6, David goes on to protest and he said, well, look, in this particular instance, I have to say with a clear conscience for the Lord, I am innocent of these allegations. Now, David's not claiming sinlessness.

He's just saying in this respect, I am without fault. I'm not guilty as charged. In fact, he says, if I had been, then I recognize that I would deserve to lose my glory.

I would deserve, and by the way, I think his glory is that his position and authority is God's an undone king. So I think David's saying, look, I tell you now I'm innocent of these charges because if I was guilty, then I would deserve everything that was coming my way.

[23:11] So where does that leave King David? Well, verses 6 through 16, he turned in appeal to the Lord. Arise, O Lord, in your anger.

It's a strange way to address God, isn't it? Arise in your anger. Lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies.

Awake for me. You have appointed a judgment. judgment. What's David saying here in the poetry of this psalm?

Well, I think he's recognizing and accepting that attacks on him as God's anointed king are actually, just as a way, a representation of people's desire to attack God.

God. He was God's king, appointed to rule God's people in God's righteousness and truth and justice. That was his brief as God's king.

[24 : 18] And so as people want to express their sinful autonomy from God, then David recognizes he becomes the target for that. They can't get to God up there, as it were, but they can get to God's appointed king.

And so David longs for the Lord to act, to deal with sin, rebellion, injustice, lies, and evil, and establish truth and rightness. Because David sees that the attack on him is much, much more serious.

It's an attack on God. And David hates that. His concern is much bigger than himself in his own circumstances. His concern, therefore, is for God's honor.

And David knows that God will always be true to himself. He will always be true to his righteous character. He knows, as I've already looked at that verse, that God feels the offense and injustice and rebellion deeply every single day.

God, in his righteousness, cannot ignore it. God will and has established the day of judgment whereby truth and righteousness and justice and uprightness will be demonstrated and established.

[25 : 42] And by definition, then, sin and rebellion will be destroyed. equally true for David, as he looks into this bigger picture, equally true is that those who fear the Lord, who seek to obey his word and serve him faithfully, those who are in relationship with him have nothing to fear in judgment.

That appointed time of judgment will mean, as it says in these verses here, will also be the time when righteousness and the righteous are established. Rebellion will be exposed and dealt with and righteousness will be exposed and commended.

And as I've said before, look at verse 8. The Lord judges the people. Judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness and according to the integrity that is in me. O, let the evil of the wicked come to an end and may you establish the righteous, you who test the minds and the hearts, O righteous God.

David's confidence is, as I've said before, the day in which God acts to judge sin severely will also be the day of his deliverance into the enjoyment of God's righteousness.

righteousness. And in the meanwhile, David can find refuge in the Lord and in the Lord's character.

[27 : 23] He can find refuge in his acceptance and relationship with God. He can be confident in God's protection. God will be a shield to him as he seeks to live faithfully before God in spite of the injustices he suffers.

And so in that picture, we have what I always like to call when I'm preaching from the Psalms, a whisper of Jesus. Because Jesus, King David, foreshadowed, therefore, as the slandered king, he foreshadowed the slandered Messiah who would come.

King David was God's anointed king and savior figure whose role was to establish God's kingdom, that is God's people in God's place and under God's rule of righteousness and justice and truth.

But you see, King David was never able to deliver. King David was part of the problem of sin and injustice and unrighteousness. He needed to be saved. He was not able to save.

In the way that was required. He could not rule God's unruly, sinful people. So ultimately, King David only pointed forward to the one that the Lord had spoken about through his prophets, the true king, the true savior, Messiah, who would establish God's kingdom of rule of righteousness and justice and truth and purity.

[29 : 01] And when we jump forward to the time of Jesus, we see the same pattern. Jesus came to his own, but his own would not receive him.

He was the slandered Messiah. He came to save those who were desperate in need of salvation. But they chose the path of continuing persistent autonomy.

Jesus came to offer them righteousness as a gift of grace and mercy, something they couldn't do for themselves, but no. People around them wanted to persist in pursuing self-righteousness through their own acts of goodness, perceived goodness.

And to do that, they had to knock Jesus down, verbally and finally physically.

And in the death of Jesus, we see two great things. In the death of Jesus, God, the great warrior for righteousness, truth, justice, purity, acted decisively.

[30 : 19] That moment in time that David had anticipated had arrived. God acted to deal with sin. And his judgment was ever so severe.

God acted true to his character as he had promised. Both punishing sin to its full extent, but also showing grace and mercy to his people.

All of that is demonstrated to us in the death of Christ on the cross. The amazing thing is, well, the non-amazing thing is that God was true to his word.

The day of judgment arrived, as he said it would. That's not amazing. That's just what God does.

The amazing thing is that God's day of judgment was focused on his own son.

So guilty rebels didn't have to face his wrath. Didn't have to face the consequences of their own sin. Just let me pause there and step sideways for a minute.

[31 : 26] I couldn't go past this moment, even though it's not in the flow of what I want to do. It's very, very common to hear people say today about wanting to be on the right side of history.

Now, that's usually in terms of the gender debate that we're hearing these days. But it's a good phrase. If you want to be on the right side of history this morning, whatever age you are here this morning, from the oldest to the youngest, then you can be on the right side of history this morning, which is, I take it, escaping God's judgment, which is condemnation and death, and enjoying the full experience of God's righteousness, which is the good life of blessing.

Now, it makes sense to me to be on the right side of history, is to be experiencing God's righteousness as blessing and salvation and refuge and defense and protection, not as judgment. Which side of history will you be on? Well, that determines, that's determined very, very simply. It is determined this morning by how you respond to Jesus.

Continue to ignore him. Continue to pursue self-salvation, self-righteousness. And you will experience God's judgment.

[32 : 50] May not happen this week or next week or next year, but you will experience God's judgment. Because God is true to his character. But if you come to Jesus, as it says here, repent, come to Jesus, admit your desire for autonomy, admit your sin, plead for grace and mercy, then you will find that the ferocious God becomes the place of great refuge and comfort and security in life.

So I just say to you this morning, get on the right side of history. Because in your life, you don't know how long your history is going to have or be.

You might have 20 years, or you might not make it home today. Get on the right side of history. Anyway, let me carry on with where I was going.

The pattern from the slandered Messiah. The pattern continues for us as the slandered, as Christ's slandered ambassadors. In 2 Corinthians 5.20, Paul describes Christians as Christ's ambassadors. That is, we've been appointed, as it were, to continue to be agents of the warrior, the God of justice and righteousness and truth and integrity and purity.

[34 : 17] The work of building God's kingdom of righteousness on earth. The baton has passed to you and me, as it was for King David, as it was for the slandered Messiah, so it is for us as Christ's ambassadors.

And so we can expect also to be slandered and attacked as those who are our great models before us were.

In Matthew chapter 10, verse 25, Jesus has just sent his disciples out into the world. And he says up front to them, it's going to be nasty out there.

And he says, you can't expect it to be any different as for the master, so for the servant. You guys have seen and observed how they've treated me.

So you can expect the same treatment as you go forth. We will be called self-righteous. We will be slandered as hypocrites.

[35 : 17] We will be deemed to be judgmental hate speakers. We will be subjected to mocking and derision. We will feel the full force of our cancel culture. In short, we also will experience as a norm of life injustice.

Because we identify with the king of righteousness. And we seek to make people aware of the rebellion and unrighteous state.

And that puts people in the corner. Either they can admit to that, or they can come out swinging and take us out of the action. Take us down. So, last, in the last borrowed minutes, I was going to say in

the last few minutes, but in the last borrowed minutes, how should we respond theologically to experiencing injustice?

Well, very simply, as per the pattern of King David and as per the pattern of King Jesus. First thing is this. We've got to know the Lord and his righteous character.

We really have to teach ourselves to think theologically in the midst of the attacks that will come to us in our culture because we're Christians for no other reason.

[36 : 43] We need to understand that God feels in a way that not even we feel the pain and the indignation of evil and rebellion and autonomy every moment of the day.

The Lord feels it much, much more deeply than we do. And we've got to know the Lord and be able to trust that he will act to make things right.

But not necessarily in our time frame and not necessarily as we might expect him to act to make things right in our particular situation of injustice.

Second thing, and it picks up and I didn't have time to look at it deeply in verses 4, 5, and 6.

We've got to strive to ensure that all allegations or accusations or slander against us are in fact baseless. Now I throw this in because sometimes I hear Christians claiming persecution when I know jolly well and have to say to them you've just been obnoxious.

[37 : 54] Why wouldn't your workmates have a go at you when this is how you carry on like a... Anyway. Yeah, okay. I won't get too much into that. We've got to make sure that when the community out there say, you know, accusers of being man-loving that we can actually say with a clear conscience that's baseless.

When they say we're hypocritical we can say that's baseless. Thirdly, we've got to turn to the Lord as David did and entrust ourselves to him with confidence and suck in that beautiful picture of both a refuge and a shield.

You have a secure place to hide. You have a secure place of safety. You have a secure place not just to hide and be safe but to thrive in the righteousness and the goodness of God in the midst of the unrighteousness and evil of our world.

King David entrusted himself to the Lord in the face of injustice. The Lord Jesus entrusted himself to the Lord in the face of injustice. Read the second part of 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 23 in particular. And we're encouraged to follow their model in every circumstance of life. So my friends don't be anxious in the face of injustice. Don't focus on getting your circumstances changed in the face of injustice.

[39 : 30] Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness and everything else flows from there. Long for purity. make sure your actions are righteous and truthful and loving.

Focus on growing in trust and dependence of the Lord and in appreciation of his beauty rather than focusing on getting a hassle-free life.

life. And I have to say to you with a great sense of shame because I'm your pastor I've spent way too many of my years as a pastor subtly chasing a hassle-free life.

It's just awful when I now realize it. And I didn't spend those years chasing the beauty and the desirability of God. If we can do the latter then like King David I've said it before the beauty and the desirability and the reliability of God will push us to praise and thankfulness in the mess of life and in the pain of experiencing more and more injustices which I fear I need to say to you as your pastor is the lot we are now facing as our culture changes rapidly.

Pray with me please. Lord help us not to be frightened of your righteous character your fierce righteousness and inseparably tied to that as an expression of it your severe judgment.

[41 : 21] Rather Lord let us find in that a place of refuge and comfort and confidence in our experiences of injustice in daily living.

Help us Lord therefore to think theologically about you think with the Bible in mind and think with the Bible in mind about our experience of injustice and lead us Lord as you would encourage us in every opportunity of life into praise and thankfulness in Jesus name I pray.

Amen. and breathe