

Prayers Set to Poetry

A Sermon by Rev. John Edgerton

Sunday, July 21, 2019 | Old South Church in Boston

The Psalms are prayers set to poetry. Because God has not changed and the human heart has not changed, the Psalms can be prayed with equal right by anyone—from ancient times to today. That is what makes the Psalms live and move. At one moment the Psalms breathe deep and meditate. At another they can burn spitting hot with rage or gasp in sorrow and weeping. The Psalms are prayers set to poetry. Because God has not changed and the human heart has not changed, the Psalms can be prayed with equal right by anyone.

I can with wholehearted fervor pray this prayer, Psalm 52. It begins with an angry condemnation of some earthly enemy. I have often found myself in that place. Perhaps it is prompted of the actions of a public figure doing things that shock the conscience. Or perhaps it is much closer to home, a slight from someone I know who has hurt me in the small, personal ways that can linger in the memory for years. Whether near or far, public figure or private nemesis, I could pray this prayer of angry condemnation and really mean it. There are times when I could pray this prayer like I was sharpening a butcher knife. You love evil better than good, a lie more than speaking justice, disaster your tongue devises, like a well-honed razor doing deceit, why boast of your evil?

The Psalms are prayers set to poetry and the Psalms can be prayed with equal right by anyone, not just by me. This very Psalm could be prayed, too, by someone who counted me as an enemy.

Someone could well pray this very Psalm against me, perhaps because of some actions I have taken in public advocacy which they find shocking from a Christian. Or perhaps because of some particular way I have conducted my ministry. Or perhaps for something much closer to home, some way that I hurt them, hurt them in that small, personal way that can linger in the memory for years.

This Psalm could be prayed by someone against me: God surely will smash you forever, sweep you up and tear you from the tent, root you out from the land of the living. And the righteous will see and be awed and laugh.

Someone could well turn this prayer against me, and how do I know that God would not heed that prayer? I am not so righteous that I can say with certainty that God would have no quarrel with how I've lived my life, I make no pretense of saintliness. How righteous do I need to be to avoid God's judgment? And if God does not have cause to uproot me and cast me from the land of the living right now, how do I know that I will not someday give God such a cause? If God is indeed in the smashing and uprooting business, what assurance can I possibly have that God's judgment won't be visited on me?

It is a chancy thing to pray this way, to pray this Psalm, to pray God's condemnation down. It's like snatching at a knife in the dark. Which end would my fingers wrap around? The handle or the blade?

God has not changed and the human heart has not changed, the Psalms can be prayed with equal right by anyone. The Psalms are prayers set to poetry. And it is in the poetry of this Psalm that I think our solution lies, it is in the poetry that this Psalm's deepest and most life giving places are to be found. First, understand, the poetry of the Psalms is nothing like English poetry. In English poetry there is rhyme—end rhyme, triple rhyme, slant rhyme. There is meter—iambic, Trochaic, Dactyl. There is formal structure, sonnet, villanelle, limerick. That's what makes something a poem—meter, rhyme, formal structure. English poetry plays on how language lands on the ear. None of these things are present in the poetry of the Psalms. There's no rhyme, there's no strict number of syllables, they can be either 8 verses or 150 verse. English poetry is meant to delight the ear, Hebrew poetry is meant to delight the mind by an interplay of ideas and images.

Each line of a Psalm is divided into two halves. The first half of a line introduces an idea, the second half intensifies it. Your tongue devises disaster—like a well honed razor doing deceit. Or the first half introduces an image, and the second half transforms it suddenly. You set a table before me—in the presence of my enemies. The poetry of the Psalms is structured around the movement of

images, the deepening or transformation of ideas. And what's true of any individual line is often true of entire Psalms. The beginning of a Psalm might be totally different in tone and message than the ending—A Psalm begins with confession and ends in confidence in God's love. Or Psalm begins in lamentation in the face of disaster and ends with praise for what God has done. Psalms are structured around the movement of images, the deepening or transformation of ideas. That's what gives the Psalms their poetic force. That movement and change can happen within a single verse, or it can take the entire Psalm.

Here in Psalm 52, we have a classic example of Hebrew Poetry. It begins with angry condemnation of enemies, each line building beautifully upon itself: You love evil better than good—a lie more than speaking justice! God will surely smash you forever, sweep you up and tear you from the tent, uproot you from the land of the living. But though it begins in condemnation, it does not end there. Just as words are running out for Psalm, there is this:

But I am like a lush olive tree, planted in the courtyard of the temple of God. I trust in God's kindness, forevermore. I shall acclaim you forever, for you have acted.

The beginning and end of the Psalm are held in tension like poles of a magnet. God moves from being the one who uproots to being the one who plants the beloved firmly like a tree. The enemy moves from one who looms large and dominates thought and imagination, to one who becomes an

afterthought, a minor nuisance that cannot possibly thwart the plans that God has made. The poetry of this Psalm is a movement from conflict to peace, from fearful anger to assurance. And it hinges on the faithfulness of God, who has not changed, who does not change.

The Psalms are prayers set to poetry. Because God has not changed and the human heart has not changed, the Psalms can be prayed with equal right by anyone. I can pray this Psalm when I am furious with someone who I count as an enemy, and I hope I would pray it. Because though it begins with meeting my hunger to decry wickedness, it ends with fulfilling a much deeper hunger, to know that I belong to God and that nothing my enemy might do can change that. The Psalms can be prayed with equal right by anyone—someone who counts me as an enemy can pray this Psalm and imagine God's vengeance coming upon me. And I hope they do pray this Psalm, because though it begins with images of destruction, it ends with them seeking restoration and wholesome growth, and honest personal growth is something I want even for my enemies—especially for my enemies.

The Psalms can be prayed with equal right by anyone. Even by you. The human heart has not changed, and God has not changed. There is no requirement before praying the Psalms, no tests to pass, no hurdles to jump. You don't need to be righteous enough, or faithful enough, or clever enough. The Psalms are ancient prayers waiting for you to walk in and breathe to life again. You

just have to pray them and really mean them, and the Psalms will lead your spirit to deep places of peace. Yes of course, you can be angry at the world, angry at your enemies, angry at your loved ones . The Psalms will meet you there—and God will meet you in the Psalms, and pick you up and plant you in the courtyard of the temple of God, there to sink your roots deep into the dark rich soil of prayer. God would never pluck you up and uproot you, you have sunk your roots down into the foundation of the Holy Place, God could not destroy you without destroying a part of herself. God has not changed. And the human heart has not changed. The Psalms are prayers: they can be your prayers. The Psalms will meet you where you are and lead you on ancient roads, on pathways to peace, on that road to happy destiny.