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**The Difficult Psalms**

**Psalm 139**

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From time to time this summer, Pastor Paul and I will preach on the Psalms. The Bible is the story of God, and Psalms are the songs of the story. They express our joy and hope in our relationship with God. They express our emotions in ways we can understand. In the Psalms, you can find the highest highs and the deepest lows.

There are Psalms of praise and thanksgiving and worship – “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord” (Psalm 150:6). There are Psalms of lament that express fear, depression, sickness, trouble. Psalm 88 ends this way – “the darkness is my closet friend.” It is the only Psalm out of 150 that ends without hope. I have a friend who struggles with depression. He says, “I live in the Psalms.” He lives in them because they express what he is feeling in times of depression.

And then, there are Psalms of hate. They are called Imprecatory Psalms – Psalms that call on God to destroy the wicked, the enemy. Some of the language can be harsh and make us uncomfortable: from “break the teeth in their mouths” (Psalm 58) to the most horrible “Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” (Psalm 137)

Or, how about his one from Psalm 109 where David prays for his enemy: “May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow! May his children wander about and beg, seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit! May the creditor seize all that he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil! Let there be none to extend kindness to him, nor any to pity his fatherless children!” And it goes on and on. Talk about revenge!

What do we do with these Psalms? Do we ignore them? Chalk them up to the language of the Old Testament? Or, do they have something to say to us? The Bible is God's word, so there must be a reason why these particular Psalms are there. Perhaps we can learn from them.

I like the words of Charles Spurgeon, the old preacher of the 1800s:

Truly this is one of the hard places of Scripture, a passage which the soul trembles to read, yet as it is a Psalm unto God, and given by inspiration, it is not ours to sit in judgment of it, but to bow our ear to what God the Lord would speak to us therein.

Let's read an example and study it, and see "what God the Lord would speak to us therein." Turn to the scripture in bulletin: Psalm 139

Prayer: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen.

Read Psalm 139:1, 13-23 (you will notice I am skipping verse 2-12. I encourage you to read these later because they are beautiful speaking of God's constant presence with us.)

I remember the first time I read this Psalm. I was 20 years old and traveling with a young adult group called Lutheran Youth Encounter (I grew up Lutheran). We traveled to different small Lutheran churches, and tried to revitalize the youth program in these churches.

One evening I was reading my Bible, and I came across this Psalm. It blew me away. While reading it, I felt so special in the eyes of God that I couldn't wait to share it with the others in my traveling group. The next morning we had devotions together, and with excitement I told them about this Psalm, and began to read it.

I read up to verse 18. Then, without hesitation, I skipped over verses 19-22, and went right to the last verse, verse 23. (By the way, I am not alone in my skipping of such verses. When Psalm 139 comes up in the lectionary, it skips these verses 19-22, too.)

One of the women on my ministry team asked me, “Why did you skip those verses?” I said something like they didn’t go with the rest of the Psalm and I didn’t like them. She said, “Those are part of the Psalm, too. They are just as important as the verses you read.”

I’ve always remembered that lesson, even though I didn’t understand how these verses were important. How could something be so beautiful, then all of sudden switch gears with no warning?

Did you notice the switch? Verse 18 “Were I to count your thoughts, they would outnumber the grains of sand – when I am awake, I am still with you. Verse 19 If only you, God would slay the wicked!...and it goes downhill from there: “I have nothing but hatred for them. I count them my enemies.”

Didn’t Jesus say love your enemies?

In order to understand what is happening, we need a little background. We need to go back to Abraham, before the Israelites, the people of God, existed. God comes to Abraham and promises, “I am going to make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you.” (Genesis 12)

In those ugly verses of Psalm 139, David is talking about the enemies of Israel, those who curse Israel, and therefore God. All David is doing is asking God to remember the promise God made to Abraham: I will curse those who curse you.

I am calling you on that one, God, David says. I am asking you to remain faithful to your promise, so therefore I am calling down curses on those who hate you and your people. I am defending your honor God. So, do something!

I think we can understand that.

Then all of a sudden, David backs down. It looks like he is beginning to feel remorse. He doesn't linger in that anger and hate. He's got it out of his system, and now he is having second thoughts. "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

David is saying: As I pray for my enemies, search my thoughts, God. Help me. Help me not to take personal vengeance. Help me not to act out my thoughts. If anything is offensive in me, God, take those thoughts away.

Do you see how valuable this is for us? When we are filled with anger, when someone abuses and misuses us, when we are filled with hatred toward those who hate us, when people abuse God and we want to take revenge, these Psalms help us to figure out a way to deal with those white-hot emotions that can be so destructive.

Here is an example I heard another preacher give in how he uses these Imprecatory Psalms. A woman came to him expressing the wish that her husband was dead. He had cheated on her, and she was so angry. She needed help in dealing with these emotions, or she might actually follow through on what she is wishing for her husband.

The pastor gave her a Psalm to read. Psalm 55. Here is an example from the Psalm, verses 12-15.

"It is not enemies who taunt me – I could bear that; it is not adversaries who deal insolently with me – I could hide from them.

But it is you, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend, with whom I kept pleasant company; we walked in the house of God with the throng.

Let death come upon them; let them go down alive to Sheol; for evil is in their homes and in their hearts.”

Ah, another Imprecatory Psalm.

Again written by David (as you can guess by now is a very emotional man). He is talking about a close friend, a companion that he did things with, someone he was close to, someone he had worshipped with in the house of God. But this friend had betrayed David...and David is so hurt and so angry that he wishes death on his former friend. Just like the woman who wished for her husband to be dead.

The pastor told this woman to read Psalm 55 everyday. Rather unusual counseling advice, I admit. But she agreed.

The pastor met her several months later at a social event, and asked her if she was still reading Psalm 55. She said she had read the Psalm every day for several weeks, but now she has moved on to other Psalms, such as the ones on praise. By using the Psalm to admit her anger and allowing the Psalm to express her thoughts of revenge, her anger eventually diminished and she was able to move on.

The Psalms can be used to express our emotions whatever they are. Remember Jesus on the cross? He said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Jesus is quoting Psalm 22. It expressed what he needed to say to His Father in Heaven at that moment.

The passions that inspired the psalmists were noble, and also inappropriate. They were holy and horrifying. These passions live within us as well. Use the Psalms – the good ones, the inappropriate ones, the happy ones, the depressing ones, the holy ones, the horrifying ones. Use them to give you courage to say to God what is deep within. You will find healing for your souls. Use them. They are a gift.

For you see, God sees to the very depths of our souls – and loves us still. Thanks be to God. Amen.