



SERMON NOTES

"Responding To Severe Persecution"

Psalm 83

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This Sunday we are participating in the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. And the question that begs to be asked is: **How are Christians to respond to severe persecution?** This question is a natural outflow from "the letters to the seven churches" in Revelation 2-3. Indeed, the suffering church in many areas of our 21st century world is quite similar to the suffering church in the 1st century province of Asia. For example, the president of Turkmenistan wishes everyone to honor him like a god, to bow in front of his picture; and he calls himself "the king of kings" (sound like Caesar?). And Christians in many Muslim-controlled countries suffer not only severe physical persecution, but also economic oppression (similar to the situations of Smyrna and Pergamum). In their extreme poverty, there is intense pressure to convert to Islam . . . and some do. And yet most, by God's grace, stand strong . . . and suffer.

How are Christians to respond to severe persecution? It is a question admirably answered in Psalm 83. This psalm is what is known as a "communal lament," the cry of the community of faith in their extremity to God. It is couched in the language and historical setting of ancient Israel, but it is the cry, fundamentally, not of Israel as a nation, but of Israel as the persecuted "people of God": that is, it is the cry of the persecuted "church."



ROMANS 12:9-21

PRAY FOR THE PERSECUTORS

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Psalm 83

A song. A psalm of Asaph.

O God, do not keep silent;
be not quiet, O God, be not still.
See how your enemies are astir,
how your foes rear their heads.
With cunning they conspire against your people;
they plot against those you cherish.
"Come," they say, "let us destroy them as a nation,
that the name of Israel be remembered no more."
With one mind they plot together;
they form an alliance against you--
the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites,
of Moab and the Hagrites,
Gebal, Ammon and Amalek,
Philistia, with the people of Tyre.
Even Assyria has joined them
to lend strength to the descendants of Lot.
Selah
Do to them as you did to Midian,
as you did to Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon,
who perished at Endor
and became like refuse on the ground.
Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb,
all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,
who said, "Let us take possession
of the pasturelands of God."
Make them like tumbleweed, O my God,
like chaff before the wind.
As fire consumes the forest
or a flame sets the mountains ablaze,
so pursue them with your tempest
and terrify them with your storm.
Cover their faces with shame
so that men will seek your name, O LORD.
May they ever be ashamed and dismayed;
may they perish in disgrace.
Let them know that you, whose name is the LORD--
that you alone are the Most High over all the earth.



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How are Christians to respond to severe persecution? We are not there . . . yet. Though we encounter isolated cases of Christian persecution in our country, we don't suffer like so many of our brothers and sisters around the world—especially those under Muslim or communist regimes. And as the Scriptures say, we are to “share in their sufferings.” So this prayer we may pray . . . for them, and also as preparation . . . for us.

First and fundamentally, we are to pray. Now, our instinctual reaction to tribulation is usually retaliation: to pay them back for what they have done to us. But our Lord has forbidden us that. And our temptation in the face of overwhelming odds is capitulation: to give in to the pressure, to give up the faith. Here, theirs was a hopeless situation: encircled by nine enemy nations (some of them related), bent on their destruction, and aided by the greatest power in the world (Assyria, 83:4-8). But our Lord sternly warns against that. Rather, the recourse for His people is . . . Him. Notice how the psalm begins: it opens with the plea “O God” (83:1). Here must be our focus: our beginning and ending point. Not retaliate, not capitulate, but pray.

As has been rightly stated: “prayer is not the preparation for the battle, prayer is the battle.” For the battle is the Lord's, and in prayer we come before the Lord . . . and throw the battle-axe to Him. So, what would we do if faced with Israel's trouble then? Ironically, it is the nation of Israel's problem yet today: Philistia is the modern-day Gaza Strip; Gebal and Tyre are the coasts of present-day Lebanon and Syria; Edom, Ammon, Moab, and the Hagriles fall roughly within the boundaries of Jordan; the Ishmaelites traversed the deserts as the ancestors of the Arab kingdoms; Amalek roamed the Sinai, now in the domain of Egypt; and Assyria—well, Assyria is modern-day Iraq. And yet, even in this litany of perennial enemies, **we must remember the redemptive thread, woven throughout the Old and New Testaments:** that there will be those even from these who will share in the eternal presence and praises of God; for the redeemed of the Lord will come “from every tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). Though here these nations are the sworn enemies of God's people, one of King David's mighty men was (likely) a Hagrite (1 Chr 11:38), another was an Ammonite (11:39), and yet another a Moabite (11:46). Moreover, one of his officials was also a Hagrite (1 Chr 27:31), and another an Ishmaelite (27:30). And Philistia and Tyre will become “born again” as God's people (Ps 87:4). And even hated Assyria and Egypt will both become God's very own, on par with Israel—fully embraced into God's people (Isa 19:24-25). Even when we rightly—as God demonstrates in His Word—pray against the enemies of God and His people, we do so remembering the redemptive constant—a sometimes-faint-yet-continuous tone, which pervades the pages of Scripture and the plan of God.



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And we pray to a God who has “bound” Himself to us. Their cry of desperation is framed in the language of relationship; they cry from the context of the covenant. This is seen first in the call to “not be silent” with its corollary of “fire and tempest”: an echo of the earlier Asaphite psalm (83:1; 50:3), a psalm that centres on the covenant relationship of the God of the world with His particular people (cf. 50:1-7). The ten enemy nations had formed an “anti-covenant” (83:5; “alliance” is lit. “covenant”) against Israel (for an expression of this, cf. 2 Chr 20, esp. 20:10-11, 14, 29). And yet, these are not fundamentally Israel’s enemies; by the psalmist’s emphasis of repetition: they are “*Your* enemies, *Your* foes (83:2; lit., “those who hate You”); and they have made a covenant “against *You*” (83:5). This equivalence can be made because they have stationed themselves “against Your people, against those You cherish” (83:3). “They are *Your* enemies,” God’s people may rightly claim, “for they fight against *Your* people.” The enemies of God’s people are . . . the enemies of God. And God’s covenant “name” (83:16, 18) is tied to the “name” of His people (83:4). For God has bound Himself to His people in covenant; and His people appeal to Him out of that covenant.

This covenant relationship holds true through time; and God has shown Himself true to His covenant in time. Indeed, this faithfulness in the past, in delivering God’s people out of impossible oppressive situations, forms the basis upon which we may appeal for God’s deliverance in the present. Here, they hark back to the days of the judges: troubled, turbulent days (83:9-12). This “name-dropping” is not too impressive to us (for we know so little of the Old Testament); but to them, they were of supreme significance. Jabin was a Canaanite king, and Sisera his general, who oppressed God’s people. But the Lord delivered them, notably through a simple housewife Jael, with a hammer and spike (Jdg 4-5). Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah, and Zalmunnah were Midianite chieftains, who oppressed God’s people. But the Lord delivered them through a timid Gideon and a handful of Hebrews (Jdg 6-8). The odds were overwhelming; the situation hopeless; God’s people persecuted, oppressed, distressed. But God suddenly overturned and unexpectedly toppled these oppressive regimes to deliver His people. And so God’s people recall the past as the premise for the present. They rehearse God’s miraculous actions in the past as the *template* upon which He is called to action again. He has done it before; He can (and must?!) do it again. And this covenant relationship holds true today. Those who have bound themselves to Christ by faith have the assurance that Christ first bound Himself to them. And it is in this relationship with our Lord and Saviour that we live (cf. Christ’s address as covenant Lord to the seven churches, Rev. 2-3).



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And we cry for deliverance in two directions: either destruction or conversion.

This psalm interestingly blends (at least) two seemingly opposing requests for divine response: destroy them (as it begins, 83:9-11), or at least terrify and shame them (83:13-17), AND cause them to seek You (in covenant relationship; cf. “Your name, Yahweh,” which translates to “Jesus” in our NT perspective) and to know/acknowledge Your universal sovereignty (83:16,18). Notice that verse 16b is literally: “Fill their faces with shame, so that *they* will seek Your name.” It is the same group, not two (as the NIV implies). Two requests, blended into one: either of which is “okay,” for either of which will accomplish the deliverance of God’s people at God’s discretion: whether by destruction, frustration, or conversion. It is either: “God, convert ‘em,” or “God, go get ‘em.”

Both sides of this request for deliverance, however, stretch our sensitivities beyond our comfort level. For we who are far from the scene of such severe persecution have a natural aversion to such prayers for the destruction of our/God’s enemies. For, in some sense, we are to love our enemies. And those who may be enmeshed in the midst of such persecution might find it difficult to plead for the conversion of their oppressors. Both stretch us; both are right; and the results in either direction are up to God. The prayer is ours; the response is His. The pinnacle of their request, however, is instructive; for it culminates with the concern for the gospel and glory of God. This is to be the ultimate purpose of our prayer; for this is what is ultimately at stake, and this is what ultimately matters.

In November 2001, we were appalled to hear reports of Pakistani Pastor Emmanuel’s martyrdom. He had just finished his sermon when armed Muslim terrorists burst into the church, stormed the pulpit, and demanded that Pastor Emmanuel throw down his Bible. When he refused, they gunned him down, along with fifteen members of his congregation. As he fell to the floor, he locked eyes with his four-year-old daughter. She survived the attack and remembers her daddy looking at her before he fell to the ground and “went to sleep” to be “in heaven with Jesus.” The pastor’s widow nobly though tearfully testifies: “Our Lord told us that in His name we would suffer. It is an honour and a privilege that my husband is a martyr for Jesus” (adapted from testimony from The Voice of the Martyrs). Such a poignant account is just one of many. How are Christians to respond to such severe persecution? **First and fundamentally, we are to pray: not retaliate, not capitulate, but pray.** And we pray to a God who has bound Himself in covenant to us. He has acted in the past and He can act in the present. And this covenant finds its focus, its greatest action (and ironic triumph through suffering) in the cross of Christ. **And we are to pray for deliverance in two directions: either destruction or conversion.** But the focus is, and must always be, the gospel and glory of God.