

The Antidote to Revenge, Psalm 59, 5/28/23

Memorial Day Prayer. Help me out with some of these familiar sayings:

- I don't get mad, I get _____
- I will give him a taste of his own _____
- Revenge is a dish best served _____

The fact that we have so many maxims about revenge tells you that we live in a culture that loves revenge. Revenge is the theme of some of our favorite stories that are told- MacBeth and the Count of Monte Cristo to modern day John Wick movies... And while the saying "Revenge is sweet" might be true in the movies...history tells a far more bitter story.

The modern history of Rwanda tells the bitter story of revenge. In the 1930s the Belgians governed Rwanda and divided the country into two ethnic groups: The Hutus and the Tutsis- it was an artificial distinction in the country that didn't exist before. The Belgians gave advantages and opportunities to the Tutsis that were not available to the Hutus. This introduced resentments and division that became a smoldering wick for the next 60 years, even after Rwanda's independence 1962. But no one could have imagined what happened in April of 1994 when the President of Rwanda was killed in a plane crash. A brutal cycle of revenge broke out and the Hutus began slaughtering the Tutsis. Most of horror took place village to village, neighbor against neighbor. The world stood and watched and in just 100 days- 800,000 Rwandans were slaughtered, that's more deaths than in the entirety of the American Civil War.

The Rwandan Genocide is a cautionary tale of nature of revenge and what can happen in the human heart given the right conditions, as we seen on some of our city streets in gang disputes. And while you may never murder your neighbor physically, Jesus says in the sermon on the mount, that we can murder our neighbors, coworkers, spouses, in-laws and exes in our hearts. See most revenge smolders like a wick under the surface in our hearts anytime we say about someone else in our hearts, "I'm going to make you pay what you've done." The flames of revenge are stoked when we gossip and slander someone at church. Or when we attempt to kill a coworker's reputation. Or when we bully, unfollow, unfriend or shun someone from school on social media. The flames of revenge burn in households through passive aggressive behavior- silent treatment, withholding physical affection, shopping sprees, affairs, workaholism...I've seen the flames of revenge rage in ugly divorce and custody disputes. And while we think we are getting even, in reality, there is no even and the score is never settled...because every act of revenge just feeds the flames.

I think we know this is true, but you may say, "I don't know what to do with smoldering wick in my heart." And that is what this Psalm series, **The Antidote** is all about because the Psalms offer us a way to come to God with our raw emotions, sin tendencies and insecurities and receive God's help in our time of need. We've heard Psalm 59 read, I'd invite you to turn there with me.

Now this Psalm starts with an interesting Heading- **For the director of music. To the tune of "Do Not Destroy." Of David. A *miktam*. When Saul had sent men to watch David's house in order to**

kill him. So we know the occasion in David's life that this Psalm is responding to- 1 Samuel 19- King Saul is trying to kill David out of jealousy and fear of David taking his throne. And he uses his powers as king to send his soldiers to David's house at night to assassinate him. But David's wife Michal (who is King Saul's daughter) gets word of the plot and warns David to flee, which he does, just in time and his life is spared. The threat against David's life continues for 4 years. And while David had several opportunities to seek revenge, never once does he do so. How did it do it? He was human just like us, he would have had that same desire burning in his heart. Psalm 59 gives us an inside look at how, through inviting God in the process in prayer, he was able to extinguish the flames of revenge. I see four steps he took.

How to Extinguish the Flames of Revenge: #1 Honest Assessment. Notice in this Psalm, David is honest with himself and God about what is happening to him. He names the injustice and abuse of power- v.1 evil doers, planning to attack him, v.3 conspire against him, v.10 slander him, v.12 lie about him. And he also accurately assessed himself and found **v.3-4 for no offense or sin of mine, Lord. I have done no wrong, yet they are ready to attack me.** His conscience was clear. "This is happening to me, I don't like it, it's evil, it's unjust, and I don't deserve it." Tuning in to God's heart means we have accurately and honestly assessed the situation, our responsibility, and what we need. And this is a critical place to start- because on one hand, some of us may be seeking revenge out a false **victim mentality**. We have painted the perpetrator as all evil, and ourselves as completely innocent. Sometimes this happens in the context of marriage counseling. On the other hand, some of us are prone to an unhealthy **self-blame**, over-realized sense of responsibility for the actions of others, or just a flat-out denial of the injustices or abuses they are experiencing. And so we need to tune in to honesty- honesty with ourselves and God about what is actually happening. And you may not have an accurate lens to view your situation, maybe because of trauma in your life or unhealthy behaviors. And so in addition to praying to God about it, this is where counseling is so helpful. And let me just say- that if you are in an emotionally or physically abusive relationship- You need to seek help. And you may even need to do what David did- he fled his home. Are you accurately and honestly assessing the situation.

#2 Surrendering Control to God

All throughout this Psalm David looks not to his own strength and deliverance but to God's. **V.1 Deliver me from my enemies. V.9-10 You are my strength, I watch for you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely. God will go before me.** This is David's repeated refrain. He knows and trusts God as his deliverer. But also notice that not once does David talk about taking matters into his own hands. All throughout this Psalm he entrusts the injustices done to him to the Just Avenger- God himself, and he prays for God to act on his behalf. **V.11 In your might uproot them and bring them down. V.13 consume them in your wrath, consume them till they are no more.** Now it is important to see here that it is not sinful to pray for God to take vengeance, David did. God is not against vengeance. God's vengeance against sin and injustice is holy and good. Sometimes I hear the shallow notion from some people, even Christians, that say they don't like the notion of God's wrath and vengeance. That's the opinion of someone who has lived a very sheltered life and hasn't seen or experienced the atrocities done to the

innocent. The idea of vengeance isn't sinful, you taking vengeance into your own hands sinful, because when we do, we are placing ourselves in the position of God.

And we do this for two reasons. **We don't trust that God is just.** If you believe that God won't act justly, and that there is no ultimate justice coming at the end of the age, then you will live as if you have to settle the score- you become the punisher. But if you believe that God will, then you do not have to live with this overwhelming desire in your heart. Do you know the story of Saul and David in the cave of En-Gedi in 1 Samuel 24? David had the opportunity to exact revenge on Saul, but he spared his life and said v.10 *"Who am I to lift my hand against God's anointed?"* v.12 *"May God be the judge between you and me, and may God avenge me of you."* He trusted that God will be his Just Avenger. The apostle Paul repeats this in the New Testament- Romans 12: ¹⁷ *Do not repay anyone evil for evil.* ¹⁹ *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.*

I think this is a good place to give a clarification to a question you may be asking. If as Christians we aren't to take revenge, does that mean we should never pursue criminal or civil charges against someone else who wrongs us? It's critical to understand the distinction between seeking justice and seeking personal vengeance. While Christians are called to not harbor personal vindictiveness and allow God to be the avenger, this does not negate the importance of societal justice or the rule of law. It is God who has given these authorities as an extension of his justice when rightly used. Pursuing legal action within the framework of the justice system might be, depending on the situation, and through prayer and wise counsel, your responsible and appropriate response to ensure justice is served, to protect the innocent, and deter future injustice.

The another reason we seek personal revenge is because **we think we can do it better than God.** "God, you are going to let this person get away with this. But I can take them down right now!" I can financially ruin them. I can get them fired. I can get them cancelled on social media. My ex-husband- I can make him pay, I can take the kids and never let him see them. This might be the way of the world, but this is not the way of Christ. Taking upon yourself the responsibility for revenge is like putting on Gollum's ring in *Lord of the Rings*. It's an incredible power that darkens the soul of all who try to wear it. Better to leave judgment to God, who will certainly execute justice perfectly.¹

#3 Aligning Your Prayers with God's Purposes.

Why do you want revenge? Revenge is mostly about us. It's about our own justification, our own anger, our own greed, our own pain. But that's not what David prays for. Can I show you something that had me puzzled this week in David's prayer? On one hand he says of his enemies- v. 5 *show no mercy to wicked traitors* v.13 *Consume them in your wrath, consume them till they are no more.* And on the other hand v.11 *But do not kill them, Lord our shield.* So which is it? Is he praying for mercy for his enemies or no mercy? Well I think the answer is yes.

¹ From J.D. Greear's sermon on Romans 12

Our clue is in the purpose statements in verses 11 and 13 he says in v.11- *"or my people will forget"* and v.13 *"Then it will be known to the ends that God rules over Jacob."* Here's my take- David is tuning his heart to the two primary purposes of God's vengeance **#1 To bring repentance by the mercy of God**. David wants mercy so that those who see it remember and see God's forbearance and kindness. Romans 2:4 God's kindness leads to repentance. We pray that God would not allow the full weight of his wrath to fall in hopes that mercy might lead to change of heart.

#2 To bring knowledge of the justice of God. When God brings justice down, when people, powers and nations are judged it is a signal to the whole world that God cannot be mocked, no one is getting away with anything. God will be glorified in both his mercy and his judgment.

#3 Aligning Your Prayers with God's Purposes. Bring your real motives for vengeance to the Lord. Confess them. But then ask him to tune your heart to his purposes. To tune your heart to desire to see your enemy experience the mercy of God and repent. After all, isn't that our story? We deserved God's wrath because of our sin and rebellion, but God showed mercy, that while we were still sinners, Jesus Christ took the full weight of God's justice against sin so that we can be forgiven.

One of the most beautiful displays of forgiveness we've seen of this in modern times came in the aftermath of the terrible shooting in Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, SC. When the families of the victims offered forgiveness. One of the men whose wife was killed by Dylann Roof, Anthony Thompson, told him in the courtroom that day, *"I forgive you, son. And my family forgives you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the One who matters the most: Jesus Christ, so that He can change it and change your attitude."*

Four years later, Anthony was asked by a reporter if he had any second thoughts. He said, "I always get asked that. And people want to know why, even if he did repent, why I would ever forgive the man who murdered my wife? My answer to them is always the same. I choose to forgive the racist killer because I believe and trust God's word when he tells me that vengeance is his to repay, not mine. I need not avenge the vile deeds of Dylan roof myself. 'It is mine to avenge I will repay.' Scripture promises me."

#4 Choosing to Praise God

v.16 But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble.

¹⁷ *You are my strength, I sing praise to you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely.* When will you really sing praises to God of his love and strength and refuge? I mean really sing from the bottom of your heart? The answer is, you will sing when you suffer injustice, you get honest with God about what you are feeling, you don't take it into your own hands, you entrust vengeance with his purposes and you find in the midst of that experience that God has become your loving refuge and strength. This is what extinguishes the flames of revenge. I find

that it is hard to hold a grudge when I'm looking to Jesus. When he was mocked and beaten and treated unjustly, he did not retaliate. On the cross He said, Father forgive them. And then I think about how I treated him with my rebellion and sin- and he forgives me? That's an extinguisher to the flames in my heart.

How to Extinguish the Flames of Revenge: #1 Honest Assessment, #2 Surrendering Control to God, #3 Aligning Your Prayers with God's Purposes, #4 Choosing to Praise God This is a process...just in can start today. Where are you in the process of dealing with your feelings of revenge? Maybe the flames smoldering under the surface or they are a raging fire in you. Make some time for you to deal with God. Might need to start with getting honest with yourself about your sin... [Give opportunity for salvation.]

Pray.