

Have you ever used words to ambush someone?

I know – I’m not supposed to ask that!

I’m supposed to ask, “has anyone ever done this to you?”

But I doubt that we are so holy that we are all the “blameless” here!

You have been the one plotting in secret,

speaking bitter words – shooting arrows secretly at others.

You have said things – things that got repeated –

and the next thing you know,

you have betrayed the trust of a friend.

I used a friend as an example in a sermon once.

He heard the sermon.

Our friendship was never the same again.

When you realize how often you have used words to hurt others,

perhaps you should become less easily offended by others.

I say this because when we talk about spiritual warfare

we need to remember that there are times when *we* are the one

that someone else thinks is the problem!

And sometimes, they are right.

But here in Psalm 64, David complains against the verbal ambush by others.

The tongue is a fire.

Who can understand it?

Certainly David does not:

I’ve titled this sermon “a song for complainers” –

but it might be better titled, “a song for complainants”!

After all, David’s complaint is not the sort of whining and griping

that we usually associate with complainers,

but the sort of legal case that we associate with complainants.

But the goal of this sermon is to help you go from a complainer to a complainant.

If I titled it “a song for complainants”

it would assume that you are already a complainant.

We know from scripture, however, that most Christians are still learning how to do this.
We tend to grumble and whine.
We tend to murmur against God,
rather than *complain* to God.

Psalm 64 teaches us how to complain.

You might think, based on how often this has come up recently,
that this word “complaint” is a common word in the Bible,
but word only occurs 18 times –
7 times in Job, and 4 times in the Psalms.

It just so happens that two of these uses are in book 2 of the Psalms!

Book Two of the Psalms is teaching us how to sing when things don’t go the way they should.

Think about Paul’s admonition in Ephesians 5,
“be filled with the Spirit,
addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart.”
Paul says this in the context of talking about how “the days are evil.”
If you are going to learn how to make the best use of your time –
how to “redeem the time” to use Paul’s phrase –
then you need to learn how to complain in a Spirit-filled way!

And you can see the basic principles of a biblical complaint in this Psalm.

First, the complaint is addressed to God –
someone who can actually do something about it!
It’s okay to bring other people into your complaint
(after all, this is a song for the *people of God* to sing!)
but remember to bring the *right* people.

Don’t just grumble to others.
Talk to those who can help make things right.

And second, the complaint acknowledges God for who he is.

You can be real with God.
You can pour out your heart to him.
But always remember who he is!
You can tell him that you don’t understand what he’s doing
(e.g., Psalm 22 – “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”)
you can point out that *God* has done this to you
(Psalm 88 – “I suffer *your* terrors”),
but when you come to God,
remember that it is *God* to whom you come.

He is not a figment of your imagination.

He is the living and true God who is exalted over all the earth –
who dwells in a high and holy place –
and yet also with the meek and lowly.

But also remember that you come to God *together*.

And that's part of what the title shows us:

Introduction: “To the Choirmaster”

To the choirmaster. A Psalm of David.

More than 50 psalms are titled,

“to the Choirmaster”:

19 in book one (out of 41),
25 in book two (out of 31),
eight in book three (out of 17),
none in book four (out of 17),
and three in book five (out of 44).

In other words, 52 out of the first 89 Psalms have this in the title.

It reminds us that these Psalms were not just private devotionals.

They were written “for the choirmaster.”

They were written for the public worship of the church.

While the Psalm is sung in the first person singular,

the Psalm is written for the choirmaster –

it is designed to show the connection between the singular “righteous one” (v10)
and the plural “upright in heart” (v10).

1. My Complaint (v1-6)

*Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint;
preserve my life from dread of the enemy.*

Verses 1-6 set out David’s complaint.

He starts with an imperative (like most of this section of book 2):

“Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint;
preserve my life from dread of the enemy.”

David looks at his enemies and he dreads them.

Fear and dread play an important role in this song.

David dreads his enemy (v1).

The enemy shoots at the blameless without fear (v4).

And then when God shoots at the enemy (v7),

all mankind will fear (v9).

The idea of dread is that of terror – of being rendered helpless by something or someone.

Dread freezes you in your tracks

(think of the feeling you get when you hear a rattlesnake at your feet!)

The idea of fear is that of reverence and awe.

Fear makes you think twice before you do something

(think of the feeling when you hear that rattlesnakes are 100 yards down the path).

I use the rattlesnake because it illustrates the difference between fear and dread nicely.

You *fear* the rattlesnake, and so you take certain precautions.

If you do not fear the rattlesnake, then you will go blithely on your way.

And then, at some point, the rattlesnake will strike *dread* into your heart!

And those who *hear* will *fear* and not ignore the rattlesnake next time!

David is paralyzed by the machinations of the wicked.

This dread is heavy on him at the moment.

Part of the reason why he dreads the enemy,

is that the enemy has no *fear* of God,

and so therefore the enemy may do all sorts of mean and nasty things.

David does not name his enemy.

After all, he writes this “for the choirmaster” –

and so he leaves the enemy open-ended.

It is any enemy who fits the pattern.

Paul says in Ephesians 6 that we wrestle not with flesh and blood

“but against the rulers, against the authorities,

against the cosmic powers over this present darkness,

against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (6:12)

Ours is a spiritual warfare –

but it is instructive to recall how Paul deals with “the wicked” in this light.

When he is speaking to King Agrippa in Acts 26:29,

he seeks to persuade him to be a Christian.

He does not denounce him or heap imprecations on him –

but 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8 reminds us that “God considers it just

to repay with affliction those who afflict you,

and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us,

when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels

in flaming fire,

inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God

and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”

Notice the different contexts.

In Acts, when Paul is speaking to Agrippa,
he urges him to believe the message about Jesus.

In 2 Thessalonians, when Paul is speaking to the church,
he says that those who persecute the church will receive vengeance.

Remember why Paul was speaking to Agrippa.

Agrippa was counseling Festus as to whether Paul should be set free.

If Agrippa sides with the Jews against Paul,
then Agrippa will be a persecutor of the church!

It can be easy to assume that people with political power are part of the “evil system.”

Agrippa would certainly count as part of the “evil system” of Rome.

But Paul does not call down curses upon Agrippa (or any other ruler he interacts with).

In this way, Paul follows closely the way of David before him,
preferring to keep anonymous the declaration of vengeance,
while calling all to repent and believe the gospel.

Verses 2-4 of our Psalm then call on God to “hide me” from their secret plots:

a. “Bitter Words like Arrows”: the Verbal Ambush of the Blameless (v2-4)

² *Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked,
from the throng of evildoers,*

³ *who whet their tongues like swords,
who aim bitter words like arrows,*

⁴ *shooting from ambush at the blameless,
shooting at him suddenly and without fear.*

Given how often this Psalm refers to arrows and swords,
one would think that this is referring to military action.

But Psalm 64 is no more militaristic than Ephesians 6!
It’s a song about spiritual warfare.

My enemies are not attacking with swords;
they are attacking with *words*.

They *whet their tongues like swords* –

The words of the wicked are sharp and *will cut*.
How will they cut?

If they open their mouths, their words will damage *something*.
(Look down to verse 7 –
and how God turns the sharpened tongues of the wicked against themselves).

They aim bitter words like arrows.

They are like hidden archers who lie in wait,
shooting from ambush at the blameless –
at those who do not deserve this!
shooting at him suddenly and without fear –
they do not think that anyone will stop them.

Words are weapons.

You always use words in some battle or other.
The question is, with whom are you fighting with your words?
Think about how Paul describes the “sword of the Spirit” as the word of God;
even so, the words of other gods are swords as well.
Either you are wielding the sword of the Spirit in speaking truth in love –
or else you are wielding words in the serving of another god.

This is why the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

The sharp, double-edged sword who sat at the right hand of the Father from all eternity
has come in the flesh.

But David doesn't see this yet.

b. “The Inward Depths”: They Think They Are Secret (v5-6)

⁵ *They hold fast to their evil purpose;*
they talk of laying snares secretly,
thinking, “Who can see them?”
⁶ *They search out injustice,*
saying, “We have accomplished a diligent search.”
For the inward mind and heart of a man are deep.

David admits that the inward mind and heart of a man are deep –
so deep that the wicked can easily think that they are hidden and secret.

They think that they are so clever that they can get away with their secret snares.

How often have you been proud of yourself for your cleverness in hiding your sin?
But sin is deceitful – sin makes you stupid –
and so we think that no one sees – no one knows.

There is a grave danger in thinking that you will get away with it
Because, as David puts it:

2. God's Answer (v7-10)

a. God Shoots His Arrows Suddenly (v7-8)

⁷ *But God shoots his arrow at them;
they are wounded suddenly.*

Again – remember that the swords and arrows in this passage are *words*.

In the same way that the wicked plot verbal traps
and set up snares with their tongues –
so also God himself shoots arrows with the Word of his mouth.
What arrows does he use?

⁸ *They are brought to ruin, with their own tongues turned against them;
all who see them will wag their heads.*

God has a delightful habit of using the tongues of the wicked against themselves.

Think of Caiaphas saying of Jesus,
“it is better that one man die for the people,
not that a whole nation should perish” (John 11:50).

Or think of Pilate naming Jesus “the King of the Jews.”

Or Haman describing how the king ought to treat the man he delights to honor –
only to have to do all those things for Mordecai!

In all of these cases – and in many more –

God uses the tongues of the wicked against themselves.

And when the arrows of the LORD went forth –

when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us –

b. Then Mankind Fears and Ponders What God Has Done (v9)

⁹ *Then all mankind fears;
they tell what God has brought about
and ponder what he has done.*

When God speaks his Mighty Word,
then all mankind fears –
the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.

Fear is not the *end* of the story for the believer.
But fear is frequently the *beginning* of the story.

Holy fear is a good thing.
You ought to fear a holy God!
Indeed, you ought to feel the terror of his holiness!

Remember the rattlesnake!
When you hear of what the living and triune God has done,
 you ought to fear him.
But when you suddenly encounter him on the path in the desert,
 you should feel the thrill of terror –
 the dread of his glorious presence
 that would suffocate and destroy you –
 if it were not for the glorious Lord Jesus Christ
 who suffered and died and rose again for you!

There is a place for fear and indeed, for terror and dread, in the Christian life.
But notice what fear should do:

“Then all mankind fears” –
 and when they fear, what do they do?
“they tell what God has brought about” –
 they speak of the mighty deeds of God,
 who turns the folly of the wicked back upon themselves;
and “they ponder what he has done.”

Notice that David does not limit this to “Jews.”

He says “all mankind” (all adam) speaks of what God has brought about.

When the Spirit of God was poured out upon the church in Acts 2,
 the church could not help but bear witness to Jesus.

But also, “they ponder what he has done.”

You can see both the active and the contemplative life in this passage.

There may be times in your life when you spend more time pondering
 than speaking –
and other times God may call you to an active life without much speaking.

But notice that those who tell what God has brought about

 and ponder what he has done,
 are opposite to the “enemy”
 who plots destruction with his words.

Instead of plotting ruin and destruction, we are to use words as weapons of spiritual warfare,
 casting down strongholds, and building up God’s people unto holiness and righteousness.

And all of this because of the *Word* who became flesh –
 or as David put it in verse 10:

Conclusion: The Righteous One Rejoices (v10)

¹⁰ *Let the righteous one rejoice in the LORD*

*and take refuge in him!
Let all the upright in heart exult!*

Notice how David connects the singular and the plural
“Let the righteous *one* rejoice in the LORD
and take refuge in him” (the righteous one is the Messiah).
“and let all the upright in heart exult!”

When Jesus rejoices, then all those who have longed for his appearing exult in him.

Psalm 64 is a complaint.
The focus is on how things are –
not the way it should be
And yet, the Psalm ends with great confidence

Because when the righteous one took refuge in the LORD,
when Jesus was seated at the right hand of the Father –
then God brought forth salvation for the earth!

God’s answer to David’s complaint is Jesus.