

“Perspectival Hermeneutics”

Psalm 83

August 12, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

Psalm 83 provides us with a good opportunity to talk about the important topic of the interpretation of biblical texts, known as “hermeneutics.” I realize that today’s sermon title sounds a bit off-putting, and you might be thinking that this looks to be a good opportunity to move forward your Sunday afternoon nap plans to Sunday morning. Before you tune out, though, let me remind you that the mess the human race is in through the sin of Adam was in part a hermeneutics problem. Adam and Eve did not correctly interpret what God said about the forbidden fruit. Bad hermeneutics leads to bad lives. Good hermeneutics leads to fruitful, satisfied lives.

There’s an old story that illustrates bad hermeneutics, a story about a young man who believes in the “drop and flop” method of Bible interpretation. That’s a method where you ask a question of God and then drop the Bible open and let it flop to a particular page and then put your finger at random on a verse. So a young man was asking God about what he should do, and he opened his Bible at random and read the words “Judas hanged himself.” He couldn’t see how that helped him, so he tried again, only to put his finger on Luke 10:37: **“You go, and do likewise.”**

The first word of the sermon title is important too, suggesting the need to bring multiple perspectives to the biblical text. To say that we can bring multiple perspectives to a text is a very different thing from saying that it can have multiple interpretations. A text has only one meaning, but the fullness of its meaning can only be grasped as we look at it from a variety of different perspectives. In his book, *Knowing and the Trinity*, Vern Poythress gives a simple but helpful illustration of this perspectivalism. Imagine a chair. If you look at the chair from above, you can get a good perspective on the shape and size of its seat. If you look at it from the front, you get a good sense of its height and the shape of its back. If you turn it over and look at it from the bottom, this perspective gives you a good sense of the quality of its construction. We’re going to look at Psalm 83 this morning by considering it from several different perspectives. My hope is that you will gain not only a deeper appreciation for this psalm, but also a greater skill in interpreting other passages.

I. The Historical Perspective

Our goal with this perspective is simply to ask what it would have meant to its original readers. Psalm 83 is a prayer with two simple points. The two

points are similar to our prayers, starting with the need and ending with a request that God meet the need. The first eight verses state the need and the final ten verses ask God to address that need.

The need is urgent, and the psalmist asks God to take quick action. This is not a time for God to keep silent or to exercise patience. He must act now because his enemies were surrounding Israel. Enemies are everywhere in the Psalms, but this is one of the few psalms where they are named. As you know, Israel is located next to the Mediterranean Sea to the west. The named enemies here form a near circle in every other direction—north, east and south. They are not acting independently, but are forming a united coalition against little Israel. It is David against Goliath all over again. These enemies are so confident of their victory that we read of them in verse 2, **“those who hate you have raised their heads.”** The uplifted head is a metaphor for confidence, a confidence the psalmist will ask God to make a false, over-confidence.

The goal of these enemies is remarkable—not simply conquest but to **“wipe them out as a nation”** (v. 4). This is unusual. Conquering nations didn’t want to exterminate all the people in the lands they fought for. What they wanted was power and money. They wanted to keep the original inhabitants in the land while making the nation subject to them and, most importantly, paying taxes to them. If these enemies succeed in their purposes, the children of Abraham will be wiped off the face of the earth.

In the face of this dire need, the psalmist prays for God to take action. He calls on God to act as he did in times past, drawing first on Gideon’s defeat of the Midianites. That was the time when God told Gideon he had too many soldiers, and Gideon reduced his army to only 300 men. The vast Midianite hordes were defeated by Gideon’s three hundred men, who carried trumpets and torches rather than swords and spears, when the Midianites began slaughtering one another. Then he mentions **“Sisera and Jabin at the river Kishon”** (v. 9). Jabin was a Canaanite king who was oppressing Israel during the period of the Judges, and Sisera was the commander of his armies. Sisera met his end when a woman by the name of Jael drove a tent peg through his temple while he slept in her tent. These are not just defeats, but humiliating defeats at the hands of an undersized army and a woman. The psalmist is asking God to do to his enemies what they want to do to Israel, defeat them in a shameful way.

In verses 13-15 he asks God to turn his wrath against them, employing metaphors from nature. He wants God’s enemies to be like dust in a whirlwind and like chaff in a strong wind, just blown away and never seen again. He wants them to be like the forest after the fire has blown through and destroyed everything. He wants them to be terrified with the hurricane of God’s wrath.

The prayer of the psalm closes with an appeal for the glory of God. He wants the end of all God's wrath against his enemies to be the glorifying of the name of God. He even prays that somehow this would lead to good for God's enemies, as they seek the name of God.

II. The Biblical-Theological Perspective

Let's turn now to look at the psalm through another perspective, what I have called the biblical-theological perspective. This perspective requires that we see a passage as part of the larger story of the Bible. Though the Bible has many human authors, it has only one divine author, and for that reason is a unified book with a central theme. The biblical-theological perspective sees how each passage relates to that larger theme.

The theme of this psalm is the enmity directed toward God's people by the enemies of God. This theme reaches back to the beginning of the Bible and continues through to its end. We get a first glimpse of it in the curse pronounced after the sin of Adam and Eve. God said to the serpent, **"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel"** (Gen. 3:15). Jesus is the ultimate seed of the woman, and he is the one who crushes the head of Satan. Since Satan was told of his demise by one who would be born from the woman, his hatred is poured out against her descendants in an attempt to wipe them out. That is undoubtedly what the psalmist was referring to when he said that these enemies were saying, "let us wipe them out." This explains the efforts of Pharaoh to kill all the Jewish male babies born in Egypt. That is why Herod murdered the babies in Bethlehem. Revelation 12 speaks at length about this war between Satan and the offspring of the woman. It tells of Satan's efforts to destroy the male child, efforts that ultimately failed to be achieved. Jesus is that seed of the woman, the male child who crushes the head of Satan. But he is now ascended into heaven, out of reach of Satan. Revelation 12 tells us what happens next. **"Then the dragon became furious with the woman and went off to make war on the rest of her offspring, on those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus"** (Rev. 12:17). That is talking about the Church.

The people of God in the Old Testament were hated by the enemies of God. The people of God in the New Testament will also be hated by the enemies of God. I think we can all think of examples of this kind of hatred, hatred that seems not to make much sense. Several years ago, I was reading an outdoors magazine published in Portland, Oregon. The magazine did a survey among its readers about the best outdoors city in the country. Much to the surprise of the editors and staff of the magazine, the winner was Chattanooga. So they sent a reporter down to do a story about this city's outdoors life. The article reported on all the wonderful outdoors opportunities available in the greater

Chattanooga area, and then in its concluding section said something like this. “This would indeed be a great city to live in if it weren’t for all the evangelical Christians who make this their home.”

I think we have all witnessed such animosity against Christianity. The explanation given for that by the Bible is found right here in this psalm. Did you notice how emphasis is given in the psalm on the fact that these are God’s enemies? Repeatedly, the psalmist calls these enemies *your* enemies, referring to God. When we see those who oppose us primarily as God’s enemies, it does several good things for us. First, we don’t feel so alone because we are standing with God. Second, we can leave it up to God to deal with them as he sees fit. These things begin to bring us to application, so let’s go there now.

III. The Practical Perspective

We don’t really understand the Bible until we come to this third perspective and apply it to our lives. The apostle Paul helps us with our first application. In his passage on spiritual warfare in Ephesians 6, he commands us to keep alert and pray. We have enemies who long for our destruction. These enemies are the world, the flesh and the devil. One of the enemies mentioned in Psalm 83 is Tyre. This city was not known as a military power, and its opposition to Israel almost assuredly did not take a military form. Its enmity took the form of materialism and worldliness, attempting to destroy Israel through the idolatry of wealth. The flesh refers to our sinful nature, a nature still within us all. And the devil seeks still to destroy us, as the passage from Revelation 12 that we read earlier says.

We are to be on the alert for these enemies, recognizing the potential destruction they represent. I read this week about a young man who once took a job working for a rancher in Texas. His job was simply to walk with a backpack sprayer filled with Roundup and spray on the unwanted mesquite trees growing all throughout his land. He said that it would have been a very boring job except for one thing—it was rattlesnake country. He had to wear thick chaps that came up over his knees. He watched every step he took and always had his ears open to that dreaded rattling sound. The same kind of vigilance is needed by us. One of our enemies, our flesh, is like a rattlesnake sleeping in bed with us.

As powerful and destructive as our enemies are, and as much as we ought to watch for them, our second application is that we need not fear them. We need not fear them because, as verse 3 assures us, we are God’s **“treasured ones.”** Spurgeon writes about this verse that our enemies, “might as well attempt to destroy the angels before the throne of God.”

A third application is to pray for our enemies, just as the psalmist does. Jesus has told us to bless our enemies, and we bless them by praying for them, asking God to defeat his enemies by making them his friends through conversion. We do this for God's sake and for their good. We want the name of God to be lifted up and exalted, **“that they may know that you alone, whose name is the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth”** (v. 18).

CONCLUSION:

There's one more matter we must deal with here. Some object to the central activity of this psalm, praying for judgment against God's enemies, as an archaic, cruel and sub-Christian thing to do. I think it's important to remember that the enemies in view here aren't just people who have a different religious view. Rather, they are determined to destroy God's people. In an essay he wrote on the Psalms, C. S. Lewis addresses the prevalence of judgment throughout the book. “In the Psalms judgment is not something that the conscience-stricken believer fears but something the downtrodden believer hopes for.” Unless God shows up as Judge to deliver his people, we will perish. Unless God protects us against our enemies of the world, the flesh and the devil, we will be destroyed by them. We need a judge like the one portrayed in the Psalms. Lewis goes on to give a further description of this kind of judge.

The name which we translated as ‘judges’ is apparently connected with a verb which means to vindicate, to avenge, to right the wrongs of. They might equally well be called champions, avengers. The knight errant of medieval romance who spends his days liberating, and securing justice for, distressed damsels, would almost have been, for the Hebrews, a ‘judge’. Such a Judge—He who will at last do us right, the deliverer, the protector, the queller of tyrants—is the dominant image in the Psalms.

We have such a champion in Jesus. He is our knight in shining armor. He has delivered us in the most surprising but thorough way imaginable. At the cross he seemed to experience his final defeat at the hands of Satan. But in doing so, he crushed the serpent's head forever. He succumbed to death, but in doing so ended up destroying death itself. Because of him, we have no need to fear any enemy. Is Jesus your champion?