Sing Before the Dawn
Psalm 59
Michael Felkins
Grand Avenue Baptist Church
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I want to press pause on Psalm 59 this morning just for a few minutes. I want to teach a bit on biblical theology and gospel-centeredness before we get into the text. The reason I want to do this is because we are a gospel-centered church, and we want everything we do to flow out of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I told you last Sunday that one of my goals as I preach is not simply to give a sermon, but also to help you understand how to read and interpret the Bible. I want to dig deeper into what I mean by this.

As we begin this morning, I want to define biblical theology and how it leads us to gospel-centeredness. Biblical theology is not just theology that is biblical. It is a discipline within theological studies that helps you understand the Bible's redemptive storyline.

Biblical theology asks, "*Where does this passage fit in God's unfolding story?*" It traces themes such as covenant, kingship, sacrifice, the war between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent in Genesis 3, and God's presence through Scripture to their fulfillment in Christ. You may have heard the Bible's redemptive storyline described as "*creation, fall, redemption, and restoration."*

I do biblical theology every week as I prepare the sermon. Biblical theology helps me move from the text to the gospel and develop a gospel-centered sermon. By this, I mean the gospel is integral to the sermon's development and delivery.

This means the gospel should not be "*tacked on*," "*footnoted*," or "*assumed*" in the sermon. When I say the gospel is *"assumed,"* I mean the preacher assumes everyone knows the gospel, and since this is a Christian church, there is no need to explain it. This is not good.

Likewise, when I say the gospel is *"footnoted*," I mean it is tacked onto some part of the sermon without being integrally woven into the message, showing how the person and work of Christ connect to the text. Think of it this way: It's like getting to the end of the sermon and tacking on the gospel without showing how it flows out of the text.

Think about the implications of what I'm saying. Friends, the gospel must be integral to the sermon's development so that you understand how the gospel flows out of the text. This is one of the preacher's main tasks as he develops the sermon.

Also, since we are a "*truly*" gospel-centered church, the gospel must be central to the sermon. It is our mission and vision at Grand. We don't just say we are a gospel-centered church; we actually strive to apply the person and work of Christ in our teaching and ministries.

So back to our definitions: Biblical theology asks, "*Where does this passage fit in God's unfolding story?*" Gospel-centeredness asks, "*How does the good news of God's unfolding story of Christ shape what we believe and how we live?*" Gospel-centeredness grounds our obedience in what Jesus has done for us, rather than leaving people with ONLY a list of morals and ethics and the idea that we need to do more and try harder.

Here's my point: Commands and calls for obedience that are disconnected from, or even distanced from, the person and work of Jesus on the cross come off as a new set of commands. It is like developing your own personal set of Ten Commandments to live by, hoping to satisfy God with your obedience and earn His righteousness.

So, to combat this error, you will often hear me say, "*In light of the gospel,"* or "*In light of the person and work of Christ,"* or "*In light of what Jesus has done,"* live this way. This is how the Apostle Paul talks when he applies the gospel and calls for obedience. This grounds our obedience in the person and work of Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The bottom line is that biblical theology and gospel-centeredness belong together. Biblical theology helps you reach Christ faithfully from the text; gospel-centeredness helps a preacher and teacher to faithfully apply His saving grace as the ground and power for our response. Together in the sermon, they make Jesus the Hero of the Bible and the sermon.

So, when the gospel is assumed or footnoted rather than integral to the sermon's development and delivery, we gradually slip or drift into legalism, moralism, or pragmatics. This means the Christian life becomes more about "*beholding strategies for obedience*" instead of "*beholding Jesus*." It becomes more about "*law-keeping*" rather than "*worship*." It becomes more about your "*spiritual disciplines"* than "*beholding Jesus.*"

I need to be careful here because spiritual disciplines and learning how to do things are good when you understand they are habits of grace purchased by the blood of Christ on the cross. I say careful because externally they will look the same on the outside, but in your heart they are very different. In other words, you can carry out your spiritual disciplines with a heart that is cold and mechanical and not delighting in Jesus.

So, if you turn your spiritual disciplines into a checklist or spiritual "to-do" list, you will starve your spiritual life to death. You will look spiritual on the outside, but on the inside your heart is shriveling up. Your spiritual life will feel like duty instead of delighting in Jesus.

Here's another way to think about it: When you "*assume the gospel*" or "*neglect the gospel*" altogether and you call for obedience, you will press on a person's *will* instead of the *heart.* We want to *call for heart transformation,* so that obedience comes from a heart that is born-again and eager to worship God for all that He has done for us in Christ. As John Bunyan once said:

Run, John, run the law commands but give me neither feet nor hands. Better news the gospel brings, it bids me fly and gives me wings.

Now, let's get into Psalm 59. Do you remember last Sunday when I talked about the cosmic spiritual war that has been raging since Genesis 3? Remember, God said there would be "*enmity,*" or *conflict/war*, between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. Since then, every chapter of the Old Testament has recounted the narrative of this spiritual war.

The biblical theology in Psalm 59 presents David as the Lord's anointed who was persecuted without cause by those who resist God's choice. David prefigures the greater Son of David – Jesus. Jesus is the perfectly innocent King against whom rulers and peoples rage (cf. Acts 4:25–28 applying Psalm 2).

Now let's see how this rage against the king and cosmic war plays out in Psalm 59. Picture the worst night you can imagine. Not a difficult night, but the absolute most diabolical night ever. You are in your own house, behind your own locked door, and you cannot sleep, because there are men outside who have come to kill you. You can hear them. Every few minutes, a shadow moves past the window. You did nothing to bring this on. There is no warrant, no trial, no appeal, and the police are not coming, because the man who runs the police sent them. The most powerful person in your world has decided you are better off dead, and tonight he has the means, the motive, and the opportunity to finish you off. You feel the walls of your house closing in. You feel the darkness that threatens your life. *In this moment, where do you put your hope when the worst thing walks right up to your front door?*

Here's the deal: That night really happened. It happened to David. And in a deeper and more terrible way, it happened to Jesus. That is the road Psalm 59 walks, and by the end of it, the man who wrote this Psalm on the darkest night of his young life is singing as he waits for the morning. He didn't write it after the danger passed but before. *My aim this morning is simple: In the darkest night, I want you to be able to sing to Jesus before the dawn.*

Look at the superscription because it gives us the historical setting for Psalm 59. It is:

"*A Miktam of David, when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him.*"

First Samuel 19 tells the story. Saul's jealousy has turned into open murder. So, he sent "*assassins*"[1] to surround David's house at night and kill him. Michal, David's wife and Saul's own daughter, warns him:

If you do not escape with your life tonight, tomorrow you will be killed.

She lowers him through a window, and David runs, and he will be running for years. His distress is just beginning.

So, David, inspired by the Holy Spirit, he writes a song and puts it in the Psalter. He gave it to the choir to sing to the tune of "*Do Not Destroy."* God took one man's worst night and turned it into a song for all God's people to sing. This reminds me of the Apostle Paul and Silas singing while in prison.

Like some of the Psalms we have studied over the past few weeks, Psalm 59 is a model prayer for when you are in distress. I have four points to help us work through Psalm 59.

I. Bring Your Distress to Jesus (vv. 1-5)

As we begin, let's re-read vv. 1-2:

Deliver me from my enemies, O my God; protect me from those who rise up
against me; [2] deliver me from those who work evil, and save me from
bloodthirsty men.

We have been studying these Psalms set to the turn of "*Do Not Destroy,"* and their historical setting is that David is in trouble. He is in distress. I think, quite often, when we read Psalms like these, some of us struggle to identify with David's distress. Often, we read them in the safety and comfort of our own homes, so we can easily lose David's sense of urgency and that he's praying a desperate prayer.

For David, prayer is not a last resort. It is the first thing he does. He takes his urgent, desperate distress to God in prayer and cries out for deliverance from his evil enemies who are bloodthirsty men.

What do we see going on in these verses? The seed of the serpent wars with the promised seed and seeks to destroy[2] David, through whom the promise runs. David is the "*not-yet-enthroned*" king, surrounded by his enemies. He is a type of the greater David who would be surrounded by bloodthirsty men in Gethsemane and at the cross. Yet, here's the deal: Jesus was not *delivered* so that we would be *delivered*. And as we (children of promise) are delivered, we are commissioned to proclaim His excellencies and given ministries of mercy to those in darkness.

Listen to me because this matters. Here's what the gospel does and how I want to apply these two verses. Friends, David prayed to be delivered from his oppressors. Look, it is right and good that we pray for people who are being abused, oppressed, and persecuted to be delivered. This is the first *gospel-response*.

Secondly, we are ambassadors for Christ, who have been set free by the King's sacrifice. Jesus didn't turn a blind eye to our situation when we were abused and oppressed by sin. Therefore, we should not turn a blind eye to those being abused or oppressed.

Christ's mercy shows the seriousness of sin, since His death rescued us. The "*gospel-response*" is to name the evil committed, then do what we can to protect the weak and vulnerable without surrendering to *revenge* or *indifference*.

Next, in vv. 3-5, you might expect David to drill down into the wickedness of these men as he did in Psalm 58, but he didn't. Instead, he proclaimed his innocence. Look in vv. 3-5:

For behold, they lie in wait for my life; fierce men stir up strife against me. For
no transgression or sin of mine, O LORD, [4] for no fault of mine, they run and
make ready. Awake, come to meet me, and see! [5] You, LORD God of hosts, are

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[1] The text calls them messengers but they were really assassins.

[2] Remember the tune is to "Do Not Destroy." David doesn't want the promised seed to be destroyed. He knows One is coming later to fulfill God's promise.

God of Israel. Rouse yourself to punish all the nations; spare none of those who
treacherously plot evil. Selah

It sounds like he is going to indict the men trying to kill him, but he only says they are waiting outside. Then at the end of vv. 3b-4a, he proclaims his innocence.

David is not saying he is sinless. He is only saying he has done nothing to deserve this kind of treatment. David is a type of righteous sufferer who points us to the truly righteous Sufferer who was truly innocent and sinless.

Then David says something that I absolutely love in vv. 4b-5a, and I think we need to hear. Let me read it again:

Awake, come to meet me, and see! [5] You, LORD God of hosts, are God of Israel.
Rouse yourself.

Have you ever asked God to deliver you and told Him that it wasn't your sin that caused it? You told him you didn't start this problem and that you were striving to be obedient, and yet it all went sideways. Then you pray, and it seems God is silent. What do you do when Heaven's answer to your prayer is silence?

When heaven seems silent, you and I can acknowledge that. Check this out: *Our lament is not unbelief; it is faith refusing to be silent*.

God's silence seems like the problem, but look at the answer. We know, from this side of the cross, that God's apparent silence is not his absence. On Good Friday, the enemies rejoiced in Jesus' death. It looked like heaven was asleep. Yet, in the silence, God was accomplishing the greatest rescue in history. *Silence does not mean absence.* It never did. God is at work even when we cannot see Him or hear Him.

Well v. 5 ends with another surprising prayer request. David moves from calling for justice in his situation to praying for global justice. David asks God to "*spare none of those who treacherously plot evil."* He essentially means, *don't be gracious to them.*[3]

David's prayer is not motivated by animosity, but he sees the cosmic conflict between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent widening. So, he asks God to punish all people who oppose God's rule and His purpose to save His people of promise.

We should take the seriousness of David's prayer to heart. It asks the Holy Judge to confront actual evil. Through Christ, we should pray for more than personal comfort. We need to ask God to protect our church, restrain persecutors, expose treachery, and turn rebels into worshipers.

On this side of the cross, we can pray this prayer knowing that at the cross justice and mercy met: The wrath that should have fallen on us fell on Christ. Because of what Jesus did on the cross, we can pray and ask God to turn rebels into worshippers. After all, this is what He did for all who have faith in Jesus. (Number One: Take your distress to Jesus)

II. Jesus Will Meet You in Your Distress (vv. 6-10)

In vv. 6-10 we see the dilemma of the distress and the Lord's response. First, look at vv. 6-7 and the dilemma of the distress:

Each evening, they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city. [7]
There they are, bellowing with their mouths with swords in their lips— for
"Who," they think, "will hear us?"

Consider what he says. His enemies return each evening like howling, scavenging dogs that prowl through the city looking for a meal. It is a poetic image of predatory behavior. Each evening, they return crying out destruction and thinking God doesn't hear or care what they do to others.

Verses 6 and 14 are the refrains in Psalm 59. The repetition of the refrains conveys how trouble can wear people down through recurrence. Repetition of danger and distress wears a soul down in a way a single crisis

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[3] Christopher Ash, *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary, Vol. 3: Psalms 51-100,* 103.

rarely does. For example: The illness returns just when you thought you were cured; the same old relational trouble begins all over; the same old financial problems begin again; another threatening message arrives; and all of a sudden, another night begins with the same fear returning. Do you know the experience? You can't sleep, and you can't rest. *David's prayer recognizes the exhausting rhythm of danger and distress.*

Don't you love the way God built the experience of exhaustion into Psalm 59? The good news is that He is not surprised by our weakness and exhaustion. We can bring Him the same fear for the one hundredth night, and He will not say, "*You again?*" He says, "*Cast your cares on Me*."

You know we can do that because our sins were cast on Jesus. He paid for them through His death on the cross and His resurrection. We can cast our lives on Christ because He eternally cares for us. He actually loves and cares for you more than you love and care for yourselves.

In vv. 8-10, we see the Lord's response to the howling and prowling of the enemy:

> *But you, O LORD, laugh at them; you hold all the nations in derision. [9] O my Strength, I will watch for you, for you, O God, are my fortress. [10] My God in his steadfast love will meet me; God will let me look in triumph on my enemies.*

These verses are the turning point of the psalm. Look at what the assassins say in the last part of v. 7: "*Who will hear us?*" Look at the Lord's response in v. 8: "*The LORD laughs at them*." Not because David's danger is funny, but because the rebellion against Yahweh is absurd.

The laughter in v. 8 is the laughter of Psalm 2, where the nations rage against the LORD and his Anointed, and the One enthroned in the heavens laughs and sets his King on the throne in Zion anyway.

In v. 8, David uses God's covenant name, Yahweh. Then in v. 10, he tells us that God's *steadfast (hesed), covenant love* will meet us in our distress*. "Hesed"* finds the fullness of its meaning in the new covenant sealed by Christ's blood.

Think about what this means for us. It means that in the face of opposition, we do not match scorn with scorn. Instead, we rest in the God who laughs at human arrogance. We "*watch for*" Him in prayer and in Scripture. We listen for Him with confidence, knowing that His steadfast love will meet us and indeed has already met us at the cross. We know that He will vindicate His people. This vindication over enemies is not personal gloating but participation in Christ's victory won through His resurrection from the dead.

III. Ask Jesus to Make His Justice and Salvation Known Globally (vv. 11-13)

Verse 11 is another surprising verse in this Psalm, and there is also a bit of theological tension between v. 11 and v. 13. In v. 11, he asks that they not be killed; then, in v. 13, he asks that they be consumed. Which is it? Well, let's get to work on these verses, and I will explain:

> *Kill them not, lest my people forget; make them totter by your power and bring them down, O Lord, our shield! [12] For the sin of their mouths, the words of their lips, let them be trapped in their pride. For the cursing and lies that they utter, [13] consume them in wrath; consume them till they are no more, that they may know that God rules over Jacob to the ends of the earth. Selah*

David's prayer is surprisingly nuanced. He does not ask for immediate annihilation of his enemies. Why? So that God's people do not forget the lesson in justice. Instead, he asks that the enemies *totter*, be *brought down*, be trapped in their own *pride* and *words*, and then in v. 13, he asks that they be *consumed by God's wrath*.

David's goal is doxological: He wants the knowledge of God's rule over Jacob to extend to the ends of the earth. The people must learn from God's justice and acknowledge God's sovereignty so He is worshipped globally.

Here's what this means for us, not just the people in David's day. First, as in Psalm 58, we pray that evil be restrained and exposed so people may repent.

Secondly, if you belong to Christ, you and I must remember that we ourselves were once enemies. We were trapped in the pride of life and the enemy's lies. Yet, we were not consumed by *wrath* but immersed in the *grace* of Jesus earned on the cross. So, instead of being consumed by wrath, the Spirit of God tenderly called us

out of darkness into His marvelous light. We now proclaim through the gospel that God rules to the ends of the earth. This is the commission that we have been given in Matthew 28:18-20,

And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

IV. Sing in Faith Before the Dawn (vv. 14-17)

This last section of Psalm 59 breaks down into two parts. First, in vv. 14-15, we hear a slightly different version of the refrain from v. 6 again:

Each evening they come back, howling like dogs and prowling about the city. [15] They wander about for food and growl if they do not get their fill.

The refrain returns, underscoring the persistent threat of David's enemies, who still prowl and are still hungry. Yet here's the difference between this refrain and the one in v. 6. This refrain (v. 14) comes after David's confession in Yahweh's steadfast love.

David's confession changes the emotional weight of his distress. What once produced pure fear now stands under the sovereign control of God's laughter and steadfast love.

Think about what this means. Have you ever struggled with a particular sin and achieved victory, only to have that sin attack you later? This is often what spiritual warfare looks like. It is not a single battle but a prolonged campaign. The enemy returns at a more opportune time to try to defeat us. Yet because Christ has already won the decisive victory, the howling, prowling dogs no longer have the power to define the believer's identity or destiny. We endure and indeed sing of victory because we know morning is coming.

This leads us to our final two verses:

But I will sing of your strength; I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress. [17] O my Strength, I will sing praises to you, for you, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love.

Now picture this: Nothing has changed in David's circumstances. His enemies still prowl and howl. At this point, you would expect him to cave, but he didn't. What we learn from his response is that David's heart has changed. He responds as if deliverance has already been accomplished. What does he do? He sings a song of faith in God's steadfast love.

So, here's the point, one more time. *For you to be able to sing in the darkest night of your life, in the day of your distress, you need to believe that God has already shown Himself to be a fortress and a refuge through the finished work of Jesus. We don't simply endure as God's children – we worship with transformed hearts even in the darkness of Good Friday because we know – Sunday's coming.*

Therefore, every morning becomes an opportunity to rehearse the gospel. We remember that His strength is made perfect in our weakness. We remember that His steadfast love will never let us go. The *distressed man* becomes the *singing man* when he beholds the greater David who has already triumphed over sin and death by rising from the dead to become our High Priest and the One who intercedes for us in our distress.