

The Answer is Prayer

Last week, we considered a number of reasons that the Bible is absolutely trustworthy as being God's very own words. You can rely upon it just as much today as anyone could thousands of years ago. And I was thinking about this when listening to the weekly dose of hate offered up on the nightly news. You know, all of those angry words and hatred that people exchange among themselves these days. This hatred has emerged on the interpersonal level between ordinary people on the street and is reflected right on up to the halls of power in our nation's capital. And that's not unexpected. After all, the people in Congress and in the White House—well, they are the ones that the American people have freely elected to represent their views on things. It is only natural that these political representatives also reflect the often poisoned attitudes of hate and anger that seems to be the norm these days. In this regard, consider an article found on the website of *The Atlantic* magazine which makes the following comments about the two major political parties in this country: ***“Although most liberals feel conflicted about the Democratic Party, they really hate the Republican Party. And even though most conservatives feel conflicted about the Republican Party, they really hate the Democratic Party . . . It is deeply worrying that Americans now have so little understanding of their political adversaries.”*** The article went on to suggest that the answer to ridding our country of this combative, angry and hate-filled atmosphere is to be found in our news media and educational institutions.¹ It was suggested that all we need is for the news media and our places of education to better inform the public about the aims and motives of each opposing side—the Republicans and Democrats. Once this is accomplished, then everyone would see that we are all really not that far apart after all. And, thus, realizing this, we'd all surely find peace and harmony as we move forward in a new and better world. (Yeah—right!)

Now that recommendation sounded vaguely familiar to me. It sort of brought back memories of those old ***“Kumbaya”*** songs² of the 1960's where everyone from the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts to the hippies would set around campfires and smoked marshmallows, singing songs of peace and harmony—or if you were a hippie, you probably smoked something else. And, yet the words of those Kumbaya campfire songs make more sense than what is being offered in this on-line magazine article. The article is basically saying: ***“Hey, if we just knew each other a little better through the news media and our wonderful educational system, then everything will be alright.”*** Really—is that the solution? The funny thing is that I grew up in the 1960's and 1970's, and somehow I don't really remember it being all that peaceful and harmonious.

I feel confident in telling you today that the hate and anger in this country, on all levels of society, isn't going away if we are relying upon the news media or our educational system to change things. Believe me—neither the media and our educators, nor our less-than-brilliant political leaders, are going to lead us out of this terrible, hostile state of affairs. They are not the solution. God is the solution. And until this country turns to God for the answers, there will be no peace. So how do we do that? Well, if we want to go to God for an answer, we have to turn to the Bible. And when we turn to the Bible, we find it telling us that we need to pray if we ever want to make any progress in overcoming the hatred in our world. In the Old Testament, the Prophet Isaiah tells us to “Seek the LORD while you can find him. Call on him now while he is near.” Isaiah 55:6 (NLT2) In the New Testament, Jesus said: “Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.” Matthew 7:7 (NLT2) Paul wrote to the church in Philippi and told them: “Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.” Philippians 4:6 (NLT2)

And, if we want to help people to give up their anger and start loving one another, what do we need to pray? Well, usually the Psalms are a great place to start. There are so many great prayers in the Psalms. And let's take Psalm 137 as a potential model. This is a Psalm that the Israelites sang not long after returning from their Babylonian captivity. Reflecting upon that very difficult experience in Babylon where the Babylonians taunted them with hateful reminders of their captivity, this prayer song goes like this: ¹ By the rivers of Babylon we sit down and weep when we remember Zion. ² On the poplars in her midst we hang our harps, ³ for there our captors ask us to compose songs; those who mock us demand that we be happy, saying: “Sing for us a song about Zion!” ⁴ How can we sing a song to the LORD in a foreign land? ⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand be crippled! ⁶ May my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, and do not give Jerusalem priority over whatever gives me the most joy. ⁷ Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. They said, “Tear it down, tear it down, right to its very foundation!” ⁸ O daughter Babylon, soon to be devastated! [Now listen carefully to this part.] How blessed will be the one who repays you for what you dished out to us! ⁹ How blessed will be the one who grabs your babies and smashes them on a rock!
Psalm 137:1-9 (NET1)

Now, wait a minute! Did they just say to smash those Babylonian babies against the rocks? That sounds like a prayer the Republicans might sing about the Democrats, or *vice versa*. Or maybe it is not so far from what we sometimes feel like doing to those that we anger and rage against. Can it be that the Bible advocates such prayers of hate? Well, we know that that can never be true. Last week, we

saw how the Bible is the Word of God. And God teaches us to love, not hate—because God Himself is love.³ In fact, God wants you to cast away your hatred just like you'd throw away a filthy garment.⁴ So how do we make sense of this prayer in Psalm 137?

To begin with, we need to understand that we should never take anything out of context in the Bible. Rather, each verse must be read within the larger context in which it is written. And even beyond that, the Bible must be read as a whole. The meaning of any verse or passage is shaped by the rest of the biblical message contained from Genesis through the Book of Revelation. So, consider the context of this Psalm. Historically, Israel had been unfaithful and the Prophet Jeremiah predicted that God's wrath would come upon these unfaithful Jews in the form of a Babylonian conqueror named Nebuchadnezzar.⁵ Nebuchadnezzar, with the Edomites standing on the sidelines cheering him and his armies on, flattened Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and took the Jewish people back to Babylon to serve the needs of his empire. But, God also found the Babylonians wanting in so many respects and, due to the vastness of their sins, justice demanded that they, along with the Edomites, must be punished as well. And so, God's prophets predicted Babylon's eventual downfall.⁶

When we read Psalm 137 in that prophetic light, it becomes clear that this is not a prayer of hate after all. If it were, the Israelites would be crying out that **they** wanted to smash the Babylonians and all their babies to bits—but, that is not what the prayer says. This is a prayer that calls for the fulfillment of prophecy and the implementation of God's justice. God is the blessed one that this prayer refers to. He is the one that they praying will bring about justice. It is really not much different from the prayer of the saints in Heaven calling for the slaying of another Babylon—albeit a symbolic one—in the Book of Revelation when Jesus Christ will come again bringing both justice and judgment to all.⁷

Yes, it is true. We too need to pray for justice today—that evil will be overcome, and that good will prevail. Yet, when we look around, that is not what we see. I know it's hot outside and a long way from Christmas, but we could readily recite with Longfellow the lyrics of his carol: ***“And in despair I bowed my head: ‘There is no peace on earth,’ I said, ‘For hate is strong, and mocks the song of peace on earth, good will to men’”***⁸—for that is the reality that we see in our world today. And if we pray for God's justice to eradicate evil and overcome that awful smell of hate and anger that fills our nostrils, then we need to be careful how we offer that prayer. Why?—because none of us are without sin. God's justice applies just as much to us as to anyone else. All of us could do with a little anger management and overcome the hate that can corrode our own hearts. So we need to pray for something more than only justice. What, then, are we to pray for—especially as those prayers relate to those who we perceive to be our enemies or even persecute us?

Jesus gives the answer. Jesus said: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Matthew 5:44 (TEV) Now, if we are supposed to pray for our enemies, what is it exactly that we are supposed to pray for? Well, we need to also pray for mercy—not just for us, but for our enemies as well. For without God’s mercy, we are just as doomed as to the people of ancient Babylon—in fact, many today live their lives pretty much in a modern-day Babylon of sin, despair, anger and hate. And when you live your life like that—it yields a seriously unstable, corrupted and flawed life. But, what Jesus tells us about praying for our enemies can change that. How? Well, you might think that loving your enemies and praying for them is just for their benefit. But, it is for your benefit as well. The reason for this is that it will begin to transform you from that seriously flawed condition borne of hate, into a completely changed, perfected state, borne of the love of Jesus Christ. It will change you from a child of the world, to a child of God. Jesus went on to explain that by loving your enemies and praying for those who hurt you: ⁴⁵ [You] will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. ⁴⁶ If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. ⁴⁷ If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. ⁴⁸ But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect. Matthew 5:43-48 (NLT2)

Now, somebody might complain that what Jesus is saying here contradicts that prayer we just read in Psalm 137. They might claim that you can’t have both total justice and complete mercy together at the same time. They’ll contend that the two are totally incompatible concepts. **“To act out on one is to deny the other,”** they’d claim. They’d even go so far as to insist that the Bible is contradicting itself because there is nothing to couple these two opposites together. Yes, they might claim that, but in so doing, they only expose their ignorance of God’s Word as a whole. Remember that I told you that the Bible must be read as a whole, and not in a piecemeal fashion? If we consider the Bible as a whole, then we cannot leave out what is said in Micah 6:8. Listen to what the Prophet Micah gives us directly from God that couples both **justice** and **mercy** together with a bond that cannot be broken. Micah asks a question that provides the answer: “And what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” Micah 6:8 (NKJV) Do you see what the bond is that makes it possible for both **justice** and **mercy** to abide in a perfect union? The bond is a person. The bond is the person of Jesus Christ because when we are advised to **“walk humbly with our God,”** we can only embark upon that walk because of what Jesus did for us on the Cross. We can walk with God in no other way but through Jesus—the “Way, the Truth and the Life.”⁹ Do you know why this is true?—Because without Jesus, we could only walk in our sin-stained clothes.¹⁰ And God will not abide anyone who is

stained with sin—i.e., all of us are disqualified from walking with Him. Justice demands that all wickedness be punished—and because of our evil sins we must pay the penalty of eternal, spiritual death.¹¹ That is only just. But, God’s grace and mercy offers you a way out. If someone would just step forward and pay that penalty of death for us, then both justice could be satisfied and mercy administered—all at the same time. And as I said, “**SOMEONE**” did step forward. That “**SOMEONE**” is the holiest of persons, Jesus Christ. He paid that debt for our sins on the Cross and washed us clean of sin so that we can, in fact, walk with God in His eternal Kingdom.¹² But you can’t take that ticket and walk with God without satisfying what Micah said. You see, he said we must walk “**humbly**.”

So how do you “**Walk humbly with your God**”? The answer is to acknowledge before Him the things that make you so very flawed—those things that separate you from Him—those things the Bible refers to as sin. Walking **humbly** with God requires **repentance**.¹³ Walking **humbly** with Him requires **faith**.¹⁴ Walking **humbly** is a **life-time commitment**¹⁵, not just a temporary stroll in the park. Walking humbly with God is a journey through a narrow gate down a steep and treacherous road.¹⁶ And yet, it is that humble walk—that life of repentance and faith—that enables you to do amazing things: Things like praying for your enemies, and beginning to change a world of hate to one that relies upon the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

And that Christmas carol by Longfellow—the one I mentioned earlier? Well, that’s when his lyrics come to fruition. The ones that sing out: “***When men repent and turn from sin / The Prince of Peace then enters in / And grace imparts within their hearts / His peace on earth, good will to men.***” And, you know, speaking of songs—maybe I need to give those “*kumbaya*” songs a break, and pray accordingly. Maybe “*kumbaya*” is not a bad plea for us to be making. Do you know what **kumbaya** actually means? It means, “***Come by here.***” It is part of the Gullah creole language that was spoken by slaves on the islands that lie between Charleston and Beaufort, South Carolina. As they worked in the blistering sun of the cotton, rice and indigo plantations, they’d sing in unison a prayer song: “***Kumbaya, My Lord, Kumbaya.***” It means, “***Come by here, my God—come by here.***” That’s the answer! That needs to be our prayer as well—Indeed, “***Kumbaya, My Lord . . . Please come by here as well!***¹⁷”

Let us pray.

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¹ Yascha Mounk, "Republicans Don't Understand Democrats—And Democrats Don't Understand Republicans," *The Atlantic*, www.theatlantic.com (June 23, 2019).

² "What does 'kumbaya' in the song "Kumbaya, my Lord" mean?" www.alphadictionary.com.

³ 1 John 4:7-8 (NLT2) ⁷ Dear friends, let us continue to love one another, for love comes from God. Anyone who loves is a child of God and knows God. ⁸ But anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

⁴ Colossians 3:8 (TLB) Now is the time to cast off and throw away all these rotten garments of anger, hatred, cursing, and dirty language.

⁵ Jeremiah 21:3-7 (TLB) ³ Jeremiah replied, "Go back to King Zedekiah and tell him ⁴ the Lord God of Israel says, 'I will make all your weapons useless against the king of Babylon and the Chaldeans besieging you. In fact, I will bring your enemies right into the heart of this city, ⁵ and I myself will fight against you, for I am very angry. ⁶ And I will send a terrible plague on this city, and both men and animals shall die. ⁷ And finally I will deliver King Zedekiah himself and all the remnant left in the city into the hands of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, to slaughter them without pity or mercy.'"

⁶ Isaiah 21:1-2 (NLT2) ¹ This message came to me concerning Babylon—the desert by the sea: Disaster is roaring down on you from the desert, like a whirlwind sweeping in from the Negev. ² I see a terrifying vision: I see the betrayer betraying, the destroyer destroying. Go ahead, you Elamites and Medes, attack and lay siege. I will make an end to all the groaning Babylon caused.

⁷ Revelation 6:10 (NLT2) They shouted to the Lord and said, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you judge the people who belong to this world and avenge our blood for what they have done to us?"

Revelation 16:5-7 (TEV) ⁵ I heard the angel in charge of the waters say, "The judgments you have made are just, O Holy One, you who are and who were! ⁶ They poured out the blood of God's people and of the prophets, and so you have given them blood to drink. They are getting what they deserve!" ⁷ Then I heard a voice from the altar saying, "Lord God Almighty! True and just indeed are your judgments!"

⁸ Henry W. Longfellow, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day," 1864, *alt. and v. 5-7 by Harlan D. Sorrell*.

⁹ John 14:6 (HCSB) [Jesus said:] "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me."

¹⁰ 1 John 1:7 (NASB) [If] we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

¹¹ Romans 6:23 (HCSB) For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

¹² 1 Peter 3:18 (NLT2) Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit.

¹³ 2 Corinthians 7:10 (NLT2) For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death.

¹⁴ Ephesians 2:8-9 (TEV) For it is by God's grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God's gift, so that no one can boast about it.

¹⁵ Psalm 37:5 (ESV) Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act.

¹⁶ Matthew 7:13-14 (NLT2) ¹³ "You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. ¹⁴ But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.

¹⁷ Revelation 22:20 (ESV) He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!