

## Psalm 79

Sept 21, 2025

It's our 3rd Sunday in a row of reading a Psalm. As I've mentioned previously psalms by and large are concerned with the fundamental aspects of the human condition, with individuals and communities who are, or feel, ill, threatened, and persecuted, or happy, grateful and trusting. The psalms speak of the rawness of life. And these prayers are that which ancient Israelites expressed and sustained their beliefs, and are thus profound religious expressions. Reading the psalms can remind us of the humanity of the earliest followers of God.

Now incase you are ever playing bible trivia - here is a fun fact.

Within the book of Psalms the 150 chapters are divided up into five books. These five books are meant to evoke the five books of the Torah, or the law. But what is interesting is that there are more lament psalms in the first 3 books/sections than in the last two.

And you will notice that laments psalms ALWAYS begin in lament and end in praise. ...there is one lament psalm though that doesn't end in praise. Psalm 88. Maybe because there are times when we aren't ready yet to move to praise. But the link between lament and praise is a core theme of the psalms. And today's Psalm is another Psalm of Lament - and there is plenty to lament in our world right now, and I talked about that last week. This week's Psalm another theme emerged for me. Themes of blame and meaning making.

---

Human beings are storytelling creatures. From the time we are little, we ask *why*. Why is the sky blue? Why do the leaves fall? Why did grandma die? We don't just want facts; we want stories that help us hold the facts together.

We need meaning. We need a narrative to live inside. It's how our brains are wired, and it's also how our souls survive.

That's why every culture has myths and legends. That's why every family has those well-worn stories that get told at the dinner table over and over again — stories that tell us who we are, what matters to us, and what to expect from the world.

And it's also why, when tragedy strikes, we rush to write a script around it. We cannot stand the thought of chaos without explanation. So we reach for meaning-making:

- *"It happened for a reason."*
- *"Everything happens for a purpose."*

Those aren't just clichés; they're evidence of how desperately we want a story to stand on when the world feels shaky.

- *"What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."*
- *"Every cloud has a silver lining."*
- *"God won't give you more than you can handle."*

They're attempts at comfort, ways of trying to stitch something hopeful into the fabric of pain.

And sometimes they help. But other times, those stories feel too thin. They don't hold up when the devastation is too great, when the loss is too senseless.

But here's the thing: not all stories are equally true. Not all meaning-making is healing.

Sometimes the "meaning" offered actually makes it feel worse. Sometimes, in our desperation to make sense of the chaos, we reach for the fastest story available. And one of the fastest stories available is blame.

Blame gives us a culprit. Blame gives us a plot. Blame gives us the illusion that if we can just pin this on someone, the world will feel safe again.

---

This coming week is the 1 year anniversary of Hurricane Helene, that swept through and tore apart whole towns. Families lost homes, livelihoods, lives. I recently talked with some who lived through it and they talk about the way that hearing wind and or being near water can bring up memories and anxiety,

So many stood in the wreckage and wondered: *How do we even begin again?*

Or we think of Gaza today — tens of thousands of civilians dead, entire neighborhoods flattened. Around the world people are crying out against the genocide. And yet it continues.

When chaos comes, we do what humans always do: we ask, *Why?*

When chaos comes, we do what humans always do. We ache for meaning. Because chaos without meaning feels unbearable. Random pain is intolerable. If we can just explain it — if we can find a reason, a cause, or a culprit — then the ache doesn't feel quite as raw.

This is the human condition. And Psalm 79 gives voice to it.

## I. Psalm 79 and the Instinct to Blame

The psalmist describes devastation in detail:

- Jerusalem has been invaded.
- The temple has been desecrated.
- Bodies are left unburied, food for birds and animals.

Can you imagine walking through your own city and seeing it in ruins? Can you image knowing that kids are at risk of being shot waiting in line for rations of food to be passed out?

It's chaos. And the psalmist does what we so often do: he turns to God and says, essentially,

*"This is your fault."*

"God, you let this happen. How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever?"

It's raw. It's accusatory. It places God in the defendant's chair.

And yet — it is also an act of faith.

Because here's the paradox: you don't yell at a God you don't believe in. You don't accuse a God you think is absent. Only those who believe God cares, who believe God has power, dare to cry out when chaos reigns

So Psalm 79 is not simply about devastation. It's also about the human instinct to cast blame as a way of making meaning in chaos.

## II. Why Blame Feels so Necessary

Why do we do this? Why do we always need someone to blame?

Because Blame soothes pain in at least three ways:

**1. Blame gives coherence.** Chaos has no storyline. Blame gives one. *"This happened because of \_\_\_\_."* Even if the story is thin, it feels better than senselessness. After a school shooting, families ask, *Why? What drove someone to this?* The need for coherence is primal.

**2. Blame gives control.** If someone is at fault, then maybe something could have been done differently. And maybe, just maybe, something can be done to prevent it from happening again. Control is a form of comfort. After a natural disaster, people want to know: *Was it the government's fault for not preparing? Was it climate change? Was it poor infrastructure?* Control helps us feel less powerless.

**3. Blame transforms grief into anger.** And anger is easier to carry than raw grief. Anger feels active, energizing, purposeful. Grief feels helpless. So we turn sorrow into rage and pin it on someone — God, a neighbor, a group.

In other words, blame eases the pain. It's a kind of emotional anesthesia.

We've all seen this play out: after a divorce, after a job loss, after a shooting, the quickest comfort is to say, *"It's their fault."* It's easier than sitting in the ache.

But here's the problem: when blame doesn't stay personal — when it moves from my pain to our pain — it takes on a whole new power. And when communities build themselves on blame, it doesn't take long before division hardens, enemies are named, and scapegoats are created.

### III. Blame, Division, and the Slide into Scapegoating

#### 1. Blame as a Divider

- Blame is rarely neutral — it draws lines: *"It's their fault, not ours."*
- Families do this in conflict. Congregations do this when something goes wrong in the church. Nations do this after crises.
- Blame polarizes: it turns pain into an "us vs. them" story.

#### 2. Blame as a False Unifier

- Sometimes blame unites a group — but only by making an enemy out of someone else.
- This is the dangerous part: communities bond by pointing at a target. "At least we know who to blame."

- It feels like unity, but it's actually fragility. The glue that holds us together is hostility, not love.

### 3. The Slide into Scapegoating

- Once blame is collective, it easily becomes scapegoating.
- Scapegoating happens when we funnel the chaos, grief, and guilt of the many onto one: one person, one group, one outsider.

**AND** – scapegoats eventually get sacrificed. Scapegoating leads to violence

Why it's so tempting: because the *real why* is often unbearably complex.

- Why do some communities struggle generation after generation? systemic racism.
- Why does wealth keep concentrating at the top? Because of oligarchy and economic exploitation.
- Why do storms keep getting worse? Because of climate change and fragile infrastructure.

Those explanations are heavy. They take time, honesty, and courage. But complexity doesn't comfort anyone when they're standing in the ruins.

So we grab a simpler story. We say: *"Immigrants are the problem."*

Or: *"Black families just need to work harder."*

Or: *"God is punishing us."*

When the why is too complex to hold, we grab for a scapegoat. It feels easier. It feels cleaner. But it doesn't heal. It only multiplies the harm.

- In the Bible, the priest literally placed the sins of the people onto a goat and sent it into the wilderness.
- In history, societies in crisis have scapegoated outsiders: Jews during the plague, immigrants during recessions, LGBTQ+ people during the AIDS epidemic.
- In our own time, you can hear it after every mass shooting: They did it. Entire groups become the culprit. That's not accountability. That's scapegoating.

---

But here's the nuance: not all naming is scapegoating. There's a difference between *blame* and *naming truth*.

Blame is about relief. It's what we do when we need a quick story to quiet the ache: *"It's their fault. If they hadn't... we wouldn't be here."* Blame soothes, but it rarely heals.

Naming truth, on the other hand, is about responsibility. It looks at what actually happened, names the choices that were made, and asks what must change so harm doesn't happen again.

Truth-telling doesn't erase pain, but it does something blame can never do — it opens the door to repair.

Blame gets stuck in the past. Truth-telling looks to the future.



Blame collapses everything into a simple villain. Truth-telling makes distinctions: between tragedy and preventable harm, between mystery and negligence, between chaos we can't control and choices we *can*.

### **The Car Accident**

A teenager runs a stop sign and crashes. Immediately, the parents of the other driver cry out:

*"That kid ruined our lives!"* That's blame. It feels true because the pain is raw.

But later, the investigation shows that the stop sign was almost completely hidden by an overgrown tree. Now, truth-telling means asking: *Why wasn't the city trimming back the branches? How do we make sure this doesn't happen again?*

Blame says, *"It's your fault."*

Truth-telling says, *"Here's what went wrong — let's fix it."*

### **Gun Violence**

After yet another school shooting, the voices start: *"It's because of bad parenting."* *"It's video games."* *"It's mental illness."* That's the blame game.

But truth-telling says: *We know background checks reduce gun deaths. We know safe storage saves lives. We know countries with fewer guns have fewer shootings.*

Blame numbs the grief for a moment. Truth-telling doesn't take the grief away, but it gives us a way forward.

These past few weeks especially there has been a whole lot of blaming, of pointing fingers. One side is blaming from the highest halls of power. And that blame has already slid into scapegoating — demonizing entire peoples: immigrants, poor people, Black people, Democrats.

Blame fosters hatred. Scapegoating ultimately leads to violence. And what it never does is address the real pain that lies beneath the surface.

And I'll be honest with you: I want to blame. I have been blaming. I've drawn lines in the sand. I've decided on my litmus test for being a decent person. And I don't think those lines are inaccurate.

But I've also just told you why blame is so tempting. It gives coherence. It gives control. It transforms grief into anger — which feels easier to carry.

The danger is that if what we do here, as a community of faith on a journey toward moral transformation, is only to affirm what we already know, then we've missed our call. Right now, it seems to me the most urgent message of love — the most important task of faith communities — is this: *Do not become the enemy you are against*. Perhaps the most sacred work we can do right now is guarding our hearts against becoming the hatred we are opposing.

That doesn't mean we stay silent. It doesn't mean we avoid lament or withhold accountability.

We must name the policies that destroy lives. We must call out leaders who refuse to protect the vulnerable. But as we do, we must allow the truths of our faith to refine our hearts and motives, so that resistance doesn't corrode us into a mirror image of what we oppose.

Because at a communal level, blame only polarizes further. It gives us the illusion of unity, but it is a fragile unity built on hostility.

So here is the question that has stared me in the face all week: Am I quick to jump to blame? Does my blaming actually help the cause of resistance? Or does it keep me stuck in the same cycle of division?

Here is the difference. Blame collapses whole peoples into villains. Accountability names real choices, real policies, real harm — and then seeks repair.

Psalms 79 shows us this movement. It begins with blame — even blaming God! — but it refuses to end there. It turns to lament. And lament is a slower, truer way to make meaning. It doesn't sacrifice compassion. It doesn't shortcut truth.

So if the soul of our nation is at stake, then the calling of the church is not only to resist injustice, but to guard our own souls as we do it. To lament honestly. To name truth courageously. To resist fiercely. But to do it all without becoming the hatred we oppose.

Benediction: Go forth as a people who do not need scapegoats to survive chaos. Go with the courage to lament, the honesty to seek accountability, and the hope to live in solidarity. And may the God who hears our cries, the Christ who bears our wounds, and the Spirit who breathes life into ruins go with you. Amen

Prayer:

God of compassion,  
we thank you for the simple gifts of life today—  
for breath, for beauty, for love shared in community.

We hold before you the pain of this world—

We pray for our nation, O God—  
for healing in the face of division,  
for courage where fear and hatred rule,  
for justice where systems are broken.  
Teach us to see one another as neighbors and kin.

And yes, Lord, we pray even for our enemies.  
For those who oppose us, who wound us, who seem beyond love—  
we lift them into your care,  
asking that your mercy would transform hardened hearts,  
and that you would guard our own hearts from bitterness.

Make your church a refuge for the hurting,  
a witness to peace in a violent world,  
a people shaped by your compassion.