

Welcome

I was 16 when I dedicated my life to ministry. I had felt God's call to be a pastor for about a year, and I didn't want to do it (I wanted to study theoretical physics). It took about a year of prayer and worship for me to get to a place where I was ready to say yes to God's invitation.

And then, only a few months later, my church split. It was one of those nasty, loud, painful splits. People standing up and screaming at each other. Most of my friends and their families went to the new church that formed.

So there I was. A kid with a couple of years left before college, having just made a commitment that would change the course of my life. And the place that was supposed to be my harbor, my haven was instead a place of anger and pain. The *people* who had nurtured and led me to this commitment left.

I can tell you - that was the first time I was hurt by the church.

But it wasn't the last.

And I don't want to diminish the pain I experienced as a teen. But I've met person after person who has much, much worse stories. People who've been excommunicated from their churches. Or held down and had exorcisms performed on them because they weren't who the church thought they should be.

People who've been disowned by their parents because their parents thought it was the godly thing to do, parents working on the advice of their pastors.

I don't have to tell you - some of the worst hurts a lot of us have experienced have been from churches - from the people and from the institution.

That makes faith challenging. After all, the Church is supposed to be God's people, the Body of Christ. If we experience this sort of hurt in Church, what does that say about God? How do we recover from Church hurt?

I want to invite you to begin in worship today. And I recognize that might be hard for some of us. We're understandably skittish about opening ourselves in the context of worship.

So as we begin, I want to invite you to stretch yourself. Just a little. Maybe that means opening up just a crack. Maybe that means taking a risk you know has been coming for a while now. Wherever you are, this is a space God has created for you, and God has invited you to a church full of people who know what it's like to be hurt by churches. I want to invite you to hope with me this morning.

Message

This summer, we're putting *your* questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to create conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

We began by looking at how we know God, through revelation and scripture. Last week, we explored God's vision for us: peace and joy. Today, we're exploring one of the big barriers to that peace and joy: the Church.

This question came from a good friend of mine, someone who's not part of the Catalyst congregation but has worshiped with us when he's visited and follows us from afar. He has a long, painful history with church, one that is not dissimilar from what many of us have experienced. So he sent us this question, and I wanted to include it because it's a question I've heard from a lot of people, and one I ask myself continually:

"How do I love my enemy when my enemy is the church?"

That question really gets at a painful reality for many of us. We love Jesus. We've experienced his transforming power. But we've been betrayed, stabbed in the back. Victims of friendly fire from people who are supposed to be on our side.

What do we do when the very space that's meant to be a refuge, a harbor, a nourishing family, is the place that is the source of our pain?

Turn with us to [Psalm 59](#).

This is a fraught topic, and I want to begin by acknowledging that these feelings and experiences are real and valid. You often hear folks downplay this: Well not all Christians! or They weren't real Christians! or That's an individual, but not the Church!

I understand why folks want to react like that. We want to protect the Church. Or maybe we want to protect ourselves. So we bat away that pain.

But the reality is that God's people have always been a source of pain for God's people. The Church is often our own worst enemy.

[Psalm 59](#) is a fascinating example of how true this is. The Psalms are the songbook of ancient Israel - these are the songs they used in worship. Today, we're going to look at a bit of the Psalm we usually ignore... the title!

For the choir director: A psalm of David, regarding the time Saul sent soldiers to watch David's house in order to kill him. To be sung to the tune "Do Not Destroy!" -- Psalm 59 (NLT)

Some fun information in here: first, I wish we knew the tune for "Do Not Destroy" - that way we could sing along! But the more interesting bit is the setting of the psalm. As you're going to see in a couple of moments when we read the song, it's actually pretty generic. The songwriter is asking God to help him survive in the face of his enemies. But what enemies? Who are they? What do they want with our songwriter?

We don't know.

That's where this title comes in handy. Titles like these were used to add context to the songs and to suggest spaces in which they would be good to sing. And *this* songwriter said he wrote this song imagining himself as David, when King Saul sent soldiers to kill him.

Again, I can't over-emphasize this: the song itself is generic. You would never place this song in that context without some help. But having this context changes the whole song.

Because Saul is the man God chose to be king over God's people. Saul was supposed to represent God's just and faithful rule to the people. David should have been safe with Saul. And we don't have time to get into the whole complicated story (it makes Game of Thrones look like the Smurfs), but you can tell even from the title that David wasn't safe. The very person entrusted to protect him was trying to kill him.

With this title, this song becomes a response to betrayal at the hands of the people who were supposed to love and protect us.

Let's read together:

Rescue me from my enemies, O God. Protect me from those who have come to destroy me. Rescue me from these criminals; save me from these murderers. They have set an ambush for me.

Fierce enemies are out there waiting, LORD, though I have not sinned or offended them. I have done nothing wrong, yet they prepare to attack me.

Wake up! See what is happening and help me! O LORD God of Heaven's Armies, the God of Israel, wake up and punish those hostile nations. Show no mercy to wicked traitors.

They come out at night, snarling like vicious dogs as they prowl the streets. Listen to the filth that comes from their mouths; their words cut like swords. "After all, who can hear us?" they sneer. — [Psalm 59:1-7](#)

Can you feel how unspecific this song is? It talks about criminals, then about the nations. It talks about these people as folks who lay traps and ambushes. They're dogs who prowl the streets.

Let's read the next verse, where the songwriter shifts from telling God the problem to asking God to intervene. Brace yourself. It's... intense:

But LORD, you laugh at them. You scoff at all the hostile nations. You are my strength; I wait for you to rescue me, for you, O God, are my fortress.

In his unfailing love, my God will stand with me. He will let me look down in triumph on all my enemies. Don't kill them, for my people soon forget such lessons; stagger them with your power, and bring them to their knees, O Lord our shield.

Because of the sinful things they say, because of the evil that is on their lips, let them be captured by their pride, their curses, and their lies.

Destroy them in your anger! Wipe them out completely! Then the whole world will know that God reigns in Israel. — [Psalm 59:8-13](#)

Does that language feel... hyperbolic at all?

Let me ask that question a different way: we can imagine David feeling this way - the king sent men to assassinate him. But this is a song. In a hymnbook. For worship.

Like... you and I are supposed to sing it on a day like this.

I've never been the target of an assassination attempt. Have you?

So what are we supposed to do with a song like this?

I want to suggest that, though many of us have not been in David's position, we've been betrayed. We know the *emotions* - anger, fear, pain.

And this is what the song invites: a radical honesty before God. The sort of truth that can only be expressed in hyperbole. Because when we've been hurt, that pain is anything but rational.

This song invites us into a radically honest relationship with God, one where we don't have to hide or downplay the hurt we've experienced.

Song

God invites us to consider this space, our worship gathering, a space of radical honesty. One where we can express even our most intense feelings of hurt and betrayal in a context of holy communion with God and our church family.

That includes - and maybe especially prioritizes - the experience of betrayal and hurt we've had at the hands of those who were supposed to be our spiritual family.

Friends, I know many of us are here because we've experienced that hurt. And I don't want to paint Catalyst as some perfect church that has all the answers. Those of you who have been around a while know that couldn't be further from the truth.

And I don't want to play the victim here, to pretend I as a pastor haven't hurt people in the name of Jesus. Or that Catalyst as a church hasn't been a source of pain for some folks.

We've made mistakes. We're going to make more mistakes.

What I can tell you is that here at Catalyst, we know what that hurt feels like. And we're committed not to hide from our mistakes. We want to be a congregation where it's safe to express those pains and anguish.

After my church split, I swore I'd never be a pastor. Churches are too much drama. Too many politics.

But when I started my Master's degree, I felt a strong push from God to serve in a local church. After all, I had just spent four years studying Jesus, and what I saw again and again was that he used what he'd received from the Father for the good of those around him.

So I took a job as a youth pastor. Part-time. And my MA was only two years. So two years and out. I could do a part-time job. That didn't count as being a pastor.

I worked there for five years, long after I had finished my degree. God used that church, that congregation, to heal me. To show me that, for all her failings, there's nowhere else like the local church. It was while I was there that I rededicated myself to pastoral ministry.

And I don't want you to imagine it was all rosy. That church hurt me deeply, in ways that took a long, long time to heal.

So I don't know that I have a good answer for that question, "How do I love my enemy when my enemy is the church?"

I don't know how. It's a mystery. But I think it begins with a raw honesty before God. I don't think it's an accident that the psalm ends not with pain but hope:

But as for me, I will sing about your power. Each morning I will sing with joy about your unfailing love. For you have been my refuge, a place of safety when I am in distress. O my Strength, to you I sing praises, for you, O God, are my refuge, the God who shows me unfailing love. — [Psalm 59:16-17](#)

Friends, if you've been hurt by people who claim to love God, so has Jesus. He knows your pain. And he doesn't expect you to suck it up, walk it off or just get over it. He takes your pain with him to the cross and offers it to the one who created you and knows you and loves you.

We want to be a community with one simple, radical message: God loves you. God welcomes you.

Communion + Examen

This table is where Jesus was denied and betrayed. He has space for us all here.

How has God been faithful to me in the midst of church hurt?

How have wounds I've received from the church kept me from trusting God?

How might God want to heal me through Catalyst?

What does it look like for me to trust God this week

Assignment + Blessing

What does it look like for Catalyst to be a safe place for those hurt by the Church?