

“Abuse and God’s Word to Those in Power” | Psalm 82

The Rev. Dr. Sam Ferguson | The Falls Church Anglican

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Frederick Douglass’ indictment that his Christian slaveholder was his cruelest slaveholder is sobering. Sobering not only because it’s a window onto the tragedy of abuse, but because it points to the double-horror of abuse carried out by someone acting in the name of God:

Bad as all slaveholders are, we seldom meet one destitute of every element of character commanding respect. My master was one of this rare sort. I do not know of one single noble act ever performed by him. The leading trait in his character was meanness; and if there were any other element in his nature, it was made subject to this.... In August, 1832, my master attended a Methodist camp-meeting held in the Bay-side, Talbot county, and there experienced religion. I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane. I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty. He made the greatest pretensions to piety. His house was the house of prayer. He prayed morning, noon, and night.... His activity in revivals was great.... His house was the preachers’ home. They used to take great pleasure in coming there to put up; for while he starved us, he stuffed them.... I have said my master found religious sanction for his cruelty.¹

Abuse is a particularly dark species of harm. It involves not only the infliction of pain, but also the manipulation of power. In the case of slavery—whether ancient or modern—abuse took the form of a person, or people group, using power over another to exploit and control.

But abuse takes many forms: verbal, emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual. It can happen in many ways. Sometimes it is subtle, sometimes overt. Sometimes a one-time event; others times an entire childhood.

Our Church is facing the heartbreaking truth that abuse is part of our own past. Last week a report was released, written by an outside investigator, revealing that a youth pastor who worked on staff from 1990-2002 sexually abused minors under his supervision.

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, Chapter 9. Accessed online on April 19, 2024. <https://pressbooks.library.torontomu.ca/narrativeofthelifeoffrederickdouglass/chapter/9/>

The report establishes that church leadership was unaware of the abuse while this man was on staff. It also notes, however, that when a student came forward some years later, though some good action was taken, more should have been done.

This sermon is not the place to get into details about this—you can access the full report on our homepage, along with a letter from me. You can also come to our parish meeting tonight where our investigator will give a summary of his findings.

When I first learned about any such allegations in 2021, I too should have done more to investigate what had happened in our church's past. I am deeply sorry for any lack of action on my part.

This impacts some of you differently than others. But let us all keep in mind the words of Paul: "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Cor 12:26).

I sense that God wants this to be a time for our church to consider the larger reality of abuse. It's more common than I knew, and may be part of some of your own stories. We'll talk about it over the next two weeks.

This Sunday, we'll consider the close relationship between abuse and power, and in light of this, we'll consider God's Word to those in power. Next Sunday, we'll consider God's tears and tender care to those in pain from abuse.²

As we move into this topic, let me offer a brief definition of abuse in terms of how I'm using it.

Abuse, as I said, comes in many forms—verbal, physical, sexual, emotional. In these sermons, I have all these forms in mind. Abuse can also happen at any stage of life, but it is particularly sinister when it happens to children and youth. Recall Jesus:

If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in me—to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea (Matt 18:6).

I especially have in mind young persons who have been harmed.

I also want to highlight that in addressing this as a pastor, I have in mind these three elements that can be at play when abuse happens in the church: (1) The misuse of power; (2) the violation of trust; and (3) the use of spirituality to mask dark motives.

All abuse involves the misuse of power. But some forms include also the violation of trust and twisting of spirituality. This is what makes the wounds of abuse so deep.

² This Sunday: **Abuse and God's Words to Those in Power**. Next Sunday: **Abuse and God's Tears for Those in Pain**.

It is painful when as a young student a classmate harms you. But it wounds in a different way when a teacher does. Why—because the teacher has so much power over you, and you had been entrusted to their care.

As I have listened to a few psychologists over past weeks, experts in this field, I have learned that this can be a very hard topic for some to even hear spoken about. It can involve serious trauma, feelings of being unsafe, unseen, of shame. Those better equipped than I, say that healing from abuse is a slow and painful journey—but that in Christ, there is so much hope. My prayer for you, if you have been impacted by abuse in any way, is that in the next two weeks the gentle touch of the Holy Spirit would encourage and continue to heal you.

Today we turn to Psalm 82 to consider the relationship between abuse and power. Abuse is when harm happens by way of the misuse of power. And restoration from abuse requires the good and godly use of power. We'll see this by making three points as we move through the Psalm: **(1) The Misuse of Power. (2) The Godly Use of Power. (3) The Power That Atones.**

I. The Misuse of Power

Text: Psalm 82 opens as a summons to the powerful. You might imagine leaders gathering for the State of the Union address, or an assembly of the United Nations. Only in this case, God is the one convening the meeting, and the location is the divine council:

God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment (82:1).

Who are these “gods” being summoned for judgment?

We might picture the so-called gods of the ancient world. There is Zeus from Mount Olympus, and Brahma from India. Marduk has come from Babylon, with the great procession of the Assyrian court. From the pyramids of Egypt come Isis and Osiris. The Germanic god, Thor, rides in too, Hammer in hand. For what these gods have done to the nations, the true God will now render judgment.

Perhaps a more modern scene includes the gods of Wall Street and Washington, of Miami and Los Angeles: In strides Wealth, followed by the idols Pleasure and Pride, and the familiar gods of Washington, Power and Intelligence. These are the gods we serve today—now the True God will render judgment upon them.

There are yet others that come. Jesus says this Psalm refers to “those to whom the Word of God came” (John 10:35→Ps 82:6), by which I think he means, religious leaders. Those who have been given authority and power by God, to speak on God’s behalf, and to care for God’s people. They are also summoned.

But perhaps it’s appropriate, with God at center, to imagine all those who wield power over others, summoned to this assembly to give an account.

What is God's judgement upon these powerful leaders?

How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? ³ Give justice to the weak and the fatherless; maintain the right of the afflicted and the destitute.⁴ Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked (82:2-4).

God indicts them for misuse of their power, which has led to the abuse of the vulnerable.

Notice that God indicts them with his eye on those who have suffered from their abuses: Verses 3 and 4 speak of the "weak," "fatherless," "afflicted," "destitute," and "needy." Those with power have not judged justly on their behalf, nor rescued and delivered those in need. The powerful have taken advantage of the powerless.

What happens when power is misused is explained in verse 5:

They [the bad leaders] have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken (82:5).

As an earthquake topples a city, so the misuse of power shakes the foundations of society: "all the foundations of the earth are shaken" (82:5). This phrase stands at the very center of the Psalm.

This image, of the foundations of the world being shaken, captures something of the experience of the abused. When power and trust are intended for the nurturing of a child or youth, but instead manipulated to harm, it is like a deforming of creation, the shaking of the foundations of a soul.

In her book, *On the Threshold of Hope: Opening the Door to Hope and Healing for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, Dr. Diane Langberg speaks of the experience of a woman who was abused as a child. Looking back, that woman speaks about the before and after effects:

My comfortable childhood in the suburbs was crushed when I was just eight years old. One day I was a happy, vibrant, trusting, outgoing third grader, and then the next day I was different. Though I did not understand it fully at the time, my life would never be the same again.³

God has designed certain relationships for the nurturing of human beings—family and church are at the center of this. When harm occurs in these places, the effects are traumatic. Langberg goes on: "It is at moments such as these that one is transformed into a survivor. The persons

³ Langberg, *On the Threshold of Hope*, 18.

goes from simply living to living against the odds. The person goes from spontaneity to endurance, from carefree to watchful, from trusting to self-protective.”⁴

Young people who are abused are more likely to develop anxiety and depression and addictions, and have a harder time building healthy relationships.⁵

The abuse of power, shakes the foundations of the world—and it can upend the foundations of a life.

Apply: There are two applicable points to make briefly here.

God Sees the victim. It is clear from this passage, and the whole sweep of the Bible, that God sees you, and understands your pain. In the literature about abuse, one often finds that victims feel invisible—they hide, they never share their story, and their abuser walks free. This can be a harrowing way to live. While this may only be some solace, you are not invisible to God. He sees you. He sees what has happened to you—your body, your psyche, your heart, your soul, your life. And he sees those who have done it to you. And God’s seeing is always the anticipating of God acting.

God Sees the abuser, who has or is using their power to take advantage to someone, and His Soul burns with anger:

The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD’S throne is in heaven; his eyes see, his eyelids test the children of man. The LORD tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. (Ps 11:4).

Next week we will say more about what it means for the victim that God sees them. But now, having noted the abuse of power and its consequences, this passage also invites those of us with power, to consider its nurturing and restorative use.

II. The Nurturing and Restorative Use of Power

Text: The critique of power in this psalm is not a critique of power in general—but of its misuse. The flip side of the coin, is how this Psalm calls for the proper use of power, aware of its God-given potential to bring life.

Four commands appear in verses 3-4 to those who have power. The first two are judicial: “give justice” and “maintain the right” (v.3). The second two are more pastoral, one might picture a shepherd caring for sheep: “rescue the weak,” “deliver from the hand of the wicked” (v.4).

⁴ Langberg, *On the Threshold of Hope*, 19.

⁵ <https://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/domestic-violence/#:~:text=For%20some%2C%20the%20pain%20of,without%20a%20history%20of%20abuse.>

So along with the fierce indictment of the one overtly abusing their power, I want now to turn to all those who have power, and ask how we are responsible to steward it for the sake of others. What is the nurturing and restorative use of power?

To have power is part of what it means to bear the image of the God. In the garden of Eden, this power was meant for the nurturing and bringing forth of creation's potential. After man and woman are created in God's image, we read:

God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." (Gen 1:28)

To have "dominion" is to have authority and power, but for the sake of doing good. A farmer has power to take a seed, plant it, water it, nurture it, but always for the sake of *fruitfulness*.

In his final words, King David reflects on a lifetime of leadership (sometime imperfect leadership):

² The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me; his word is on my tongue. ³ The God of Israel has spoken; the Rock of Israel has said to me: When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, ⁴ he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth. (2 Samuel 23:1-4).

What a striking image of the proper use of power: it is like light dawning, sun shining on a cloudless morning, rain that makes grass to sprout.

There is a good and godly stewardship of power and authority—and it is always for the sake of seeing others flourish.

Apply: Let's pause here and ask ourselves a few questions.

First, where do you or I have power?

It could be as a parent, or teacher, or in your role at work. In these places do people feel nurtured as a plant receiving sun and water? Or are we in these places to build up ourselves?

But power also lies in the gifts God may have given you. You are smart and have a quick wit—do you use it build up or tear down.⁶ Perhaps physically, your presence conveys power. Do you use that to lift others up, to make them feel they are seen, or to make them feel small and unseen?

From God's perspective, we could say that when he gives us power of any kind, he gives us an opportunity: to use it to build others up, to see things work as they ought to. We could also say

⁶ "Let no corrupting talk come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear" (Eph 4:29).

that where God gives us power, he gives us responsibility, and with responsibility comes accountability: “Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required” (Luke 12:48).

This takes us to a second way of applying the good use of power. What is our sphere of responsibility?

There is our legal or contractual responsibility—what the law says, or what your employment contract says. But under God, there is a moral responsibility that spreads further and runs deeper. The scope of your responsibility before God—who or what he is asking you to care for—is often something you have to work out, prayerfully, with him. Others may not always be able to tell you.

As the pastor of this church, I think about this often: where does my responsibility stretch to? Of late, I have realized that I was quick to see how it stretched out in front of me, but need to recognize how it stretches also behind me: I need to care for wounds that may have happened to this dear flock in the past, before I was here.

You might imagine the analogy of a marriage. A man and a woman marry at age 25, but then one learns that hard things happened to the other when they were 15. The spouse cannot say: “I am only responsible for you from age 25 forward.” No. He or she married the whole person.

As the Falls Church Anglican, we want own responsibility, appropriately and before God, for those who were hurt in the 1990s. Their wounds are still real, today. We want to use any power in our hands, for their good, to seek healing and justice for them. We hope we are making steps in that direction.

Thus, there is the misuse of power, and the invitation to the nurturing and restorative use of power. We have one last thing to consider in brief: the power that atones.

III. The Power That Atones.

In a fallen world, even the most restorative and nurturing use of power does not take away our need for atonement—our need for God to act on our behalf. Hence the Psalm ends not with a summons for human action, but Divine:

Arise, O God, judge the earth; for you shall inherit all the nations! (82:8).

Even the most sincere apology, on the part of an abuser, often cannot begin to make up for the damage done: the years of one’s life taken away, the trauma that persists. There is only one place to go with this pain, to the foot of the cross. One must give it to Jesus, and trust that he can bring life out of ashes.

There is a power in the Cross of Jesus Christ, that says no suffering is too bad, nor sin too great, to eliminate all hope for the abused, or the abuser. And there is wound in the abused, that only the gentle hand of God can mend.

I close with a scene from King David's life. You may recall when he abused Bathsheba. Here is a case study in abuse: the king misused his power to take; he violated the trust of his people because he was supposed to be defending them in battle; and he even hid under the cloak of spiritual anointing. In abusing Bathsheba, he abused power, trust, and spirituality—and he tore her life apart.

What's worse, he seemed to simply go on living without owning it. But then God sent Nathan the prophet to him, who told him a story about a cruel man who stole from a poor man is only little lamb. And David wanted the man dead. But then Nathan said to David: "You are the man."

Perhaps for every one of us, there comes a time when we need to sit before the Lord and ask him where we have failed, where our failings may have hurt others, or where we failed to come to the aid of the wounded.

And there, on our knees before God—powerless before His Almighty power—with David, we too can find atonement:

The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. (Ps 51:17).

Let's pray.