

Telling It Wrong

Is there not a cause?

A boy stands in front of a giant that nobody else will face. His own brother tells him to go home and mind the sheep. And David says it. *Is there not a cause?*

I have used the line myself. More than once, in front of people I wanted to move – and the cause I had in mind was the one I was recruiting for, or the one I was asking money for. Whether it was God's cause or mine I could not have told you at the time. Most days I still can't.

It is a good line. It has put steel into people who needed it.

It is also not what David said.

The Hebrew is *halô' dāvār hû'*. *Dāvār* is one of the plainest words in the language – a word, a thing, a matter. *Is it not a matter?* Is it not just a thing? Newer translations have "Was it not but a word?" David is not raising a banner. He is answering his brother, who has just accused him of sneaking down to watch the fighting. He is saying, near enough: *I only asked a question*.

That should bother us more than it does.

A lot of people have been moved by that verse. Men have gone into hard places, given money they could not spare, taken on work nobody else would take on, and somewhere behind it was a boy in a valley asking whether there was not a cause. None of that is undone by a lexicon.

And what they heard was true. Not true of 1 Samuel 17:29, but true. David did go out. The giant did fall. Somebody has to be willing to walk towards the thing everyone else is standing back from, and Scripture says so in a hundred places. The steel was real. It came from a word that is not there.

The same English word sits over a very different verse.

Psalm 74 is a wreck of a psalm. Men have come into the sanctuary with axes, hacked at the carved panelling like woodcutters working a thicket, set the place alight and brought it down to the ground. The man writing has no prophet left to ask and no idea how long it is going to go on. Near the end he says:

Arise, O God, defend your cause.

The Hebrew here is *rîbâ rîbekā*, which comes out oddly in English – contend your contention, plead your plea. *Rîb* is a legal word. It is the case one party brings against another, and the prophets use it

constantly: the LORD has a *rîb* against the inhabitants of the land. A summons. An indictment. A day in court.

So the man is not asking God to get behind a good idea. He is asking him to prosecute. There is a case, the case is God's, and it has been sitting unheard while the building burns.

"Defend your cause" is not wrong. It is only quiet. Where 1 Samuel was handed a cause it never had, this one had its courtroom taken off it.

Nobody was careless here.

There is no English word for *dāvār* and no English word for *rîb*. A translator standing in front of either one has to give something up, and the only question is what. In 1611 "cause" fitted better than it sounds now – it could mean a matter, a case, the thing at issue between two parties. That is close to *dāvār* and very close to *rîb*. The word was doing honest work.

Then English moved, the way English does, and "cause" drifted towards the thing you sign up to and march for. A campaign. Something with a banner.

The translators did not change. We did.

That is worth knowing if you have ever had a passage go flat on you. Most people assume the fault is theirs – not enough prayer, not enough discipline, or some capacity for this that other people were given and they were not. Usually what has happened is more ordinary than that. The sentence in front of them travelled three thousand years and two languages to get there, and it did not all get through.

There is no way round that, and no single reading that fixes it. But there are four places a person can stand in front of a verse, and each one shows you something the others do not.

The first is the English in front of you. It is accurate, it can be checked, and anyone can pick it up. Everything worth believing was built on it, and you need nothing else in order to be saved. What it costs is force. It tells you the truth in a level voice.

The second is the Hebrew or the Greek underneath it. This is where the density is – the courtroom in *rîb*, the shrug in *dāvār*. What it costs is access. Most people have no way in and have to take somebody else's word for it. It costs something else too. Knowing a bit of Hebrew makes you feel clever. I have caught myself enjoying knowing something the rest of the room did not know, and for a preacher that is not a small danger.

The third is saying it to a twelve-year-old. No jargon, nothing borrowed from a commentary. *A man asks God to take his own case to court*. If I cannot get it out in those terms, I have not understood it yet – I have only collected a lot of material about it. This one costs detail, and it costs it deliberately.

The fourth is saying it to an eight-year-old.

Here you cannot use any of it. No Hebrew, no legal words, no explaining.

Somebody broke into the house while the family was away. They smashed it up. They pulled the photographs off the walls and put their own marks up where the photographs had been. Nobody has come home. The man who was looking after the place is standing in the middle of it, and he is not asking for compensation. He is saying: this is your house. Come home and deal with it.

There is not a word of Psalm 74 in that. No *rib*, no covenant, no purchased people, no signs. It is not a translation, and it is not accurate – a house is not a temple, and the man in the psalm is not a caretaker.

It is also the version that opened the psalm for me.

Not because children's language is better. Because that telling puts something in front of you that you have to picture – a room, a wall, a man standing in the middle of it. You end up inside the house. "Defend your cause" never put me anywhere. I read it for years and stayed where I was.

The telling that carries the weight is the telling that gets the details wrong. It has to. There is no arrangement of English words that does both jobs at once.

So keep the accurate one. You cannot build anything on a story about a house, and a man with only the child's version will end up believing things the text never said. Read the English. It is the ground you stand on.

But if you have been reading it faithfully for years and it has gone quiet on you, I do not think that is a failure of faith. The words in front of you came a long way, in time and language, to reach you, and some of it did not arrive. That is nobody's fault – not the translators', and not yours.

When God had something to say across that distance, he did not send a dictionary.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this article, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.