

Praying Against Our Enemies!

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Psalm 73 ESV

Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.
Their eyes swell out through fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.
Therefore his people turn back to them,
and find no fault in them.
And they say, "How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?"
Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.
All in vain have I kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.
For all the day long I have been stricken
and rebuked every morning.
If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have betrayed the generation of your children.
But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I discerned their end.
Truly you set them in slippery places;
you make them fall to ruin.
How they are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors!
Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord,
when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.
When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
I was brutish and ignorant;
I was like a beast toward you.
Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me to glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.
But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
that I may tell of all your works.

*May his days be few;
may another take his office!
May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow!
May his children wander about and beg,
seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit!
May the creditor seize all that he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!
Let there be none to extend kindness to him,
nor any to pity his fatherless children!
May his posterity be cut off;
may his name be blotted out in the second generation!* (Psalm 109:8-12)

How often we pray the comforting words of the beloved Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.” Or how often we worship with the rousing words of Psalm 100, “Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise!” But if someone had wronged you, would you pray that prayer I just read from Psalm 109?

Probably you wouldn’t. These words would strike most Christians as vindictive, unforgiving, and mean-spirited. They seem unworthy of Jesus, who taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who treat us badly (Matthew 5:44). Such expressions in the psalms have perplexed Christians across the centuries. When John Wesley prepared a collection of psalms for the use of American Methodists he removed many with similar wording, because he considered them unfit for the lips of Christian worshippers.

We’re speaking here about a group of psalms that scholars call the “psalms of imprecation,” or cursing — psalms that call for bad things to happen to the enemies of the worshiper. They include all or part of such psalms as 35, 55, 69, 73, 94, 109, 120, and 139.

We might have the same response to these psalms as John Wesley. We might think they’re kind of an embarrassment to Christians, who are supposed to epitomize a gospel of love and gentleness toward others — even those who despise us. We might consider these psalms a holdover from a less developed faith of Old Testament Israel. So we might be reluctant to read them, or pray through them, believing that in so doing we’d be falling short of the standard Jesus Christ and the apostles have set for us in the New Testament.

But Psalm 109 and others like it won’t just go away. They’re part of the Word of God. When the risen Christ told his disciples, “Everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44), he didn’t add a disclaimer excluding those psalms that I listed. And when the apostles chose another to take the place of Judas, Peter quoted from two of the psalms of imprecation, Psalms 69 and 109, to describe the destiny of Jesus’ betrayer. Let’s look at Acts 1:15-20:

In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness, and falling headlong he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their own language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) “For it is written in the Book of Psalms, ‘May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it’; and ‘Let another take his office.’”

Christ told us to “turn the other cheek” toward our enemies, and Peter, in his First Epistle, reminds us that “when he was reviled, he did not revile in return” (1 Peter 2:23). How might we, as followers of Jesus, still make use of these psalms that seem to call down the vengeance of heaven upon our enemies? Furthermore, can they serve, like other psalms, as a devotional model?

Honesty About Life

One thing we can say about the psalms of imprecation is that they’re at least honest about life. Most of us know what it means to experience rejection, to be falsely accused, to have somebody take unfair advantage

of us, or to be wounded in other ways by the actions and attitudes of others when we meant them no harm. The Psalms express our feelings when this happens. Take these words from Psalm 120:

*Deliver me, O LORD, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue. . . .
Too long have I had my dwelling among those who hate peace.
I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war!* (Psalm 120:2, 6-7)

We've gotten a raw deal, and we're angry. We may pretend to ourselves, and others, that we love even those who've wronged us. But the human heart is deceitful, as Jeremiah warns:

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? "I the Lord search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds" (Jeremiah 17:9-10).

Bringing our resentment into our prayers might just be dealing honestly with God about where we're coming from. It might be a step towards getting past our anger to a healthier outlook.

The Voice of the Faithful

But the psalms aren't just about our personal hurts. They took shape in the context of the worship of Israel, a people who had made a covenant to serve the Lord together. The voice we hear in them speaks for the whole community of faith. Traditionally that voice is that of the king, specifically David the warrior, as in Psalm 35:

*Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers!
Say to my soul, "I am your salvation!"
Let them be put to shame and dishonor who seek after my life!
Let them be turned back and disappointed who devise evil against me!* (Psalm 35:3-4)

If you belong to a community, and the whole community is under attack, then your pursuer isn't your personal enemy but the enemy of all who belong to your group. So the persecutors David is talking about aren't just his enemies, but the enemies of all the people of God. In fact, they're the *enemies of the Lord*, and of all who belong to the Lord. So the worshiper hates them not because they've attacked him personally, but because they oppose the Lord and his purposes, as in Psalm 139:

*Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
I hate them with complete hatred;
I count them my enemies* (Psalm 139:21-22).

The adversaries are merciless and cruel. Moreover, they are proud and self-sufficient. They have no use for the Lord; in fact, God isn't even on their radar screen. Listen to Psalm 94:

*O Lord, how long shall the wicked,
how long shall the wicked exult?
They pour out their arrogant words;
all the evildoers boast.
They crush your people, O Lord,
and afflict your heritage.
They kill the widow and the sojourner,
and murder the fatherless;
and they say, "The Lord does not see;
the God of Jacob does not perceive"* (Psalm 94:3-7).

But the worshiper is submitted to the Lord in a trusting relationship. Unlike the adversary, he or she is the servant of the Lord. Still, the servant has experienced a vicious attack that makes even him wonder whether God knows, or cares, about his plight. Did you ever find yourself in a situation where you could have uttered these words from Psalm 69, or Psalm 13?

*Hide not your face from your servant;
for I am in distress, make haste to answer me.
Draw near to my soul, redeem me,
ransom me because of my enemies!* (Psalm 69:17-18)

*How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? (Psalm 13:1)*

Reading these words, we understand how it is that Jesus can explain to his followers, “Everything written about me in the psalms must be fulfilled.” For Jesus, like David, is called the Servant – another title of Messiah, or the anointed one (Acts 4:24-20). And, like the servant in the psalms of imprecation, Christ on the cross cries out with the words of another psalm:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22:1)

Jesus had powerful enemies with a vested interest in maintaining their status as the authorized spokesmen for their tradition. Jesus threatened them, because he sought to redirect that tradition to its original purpose, to bring the blessing of God’s presence to all peoples. And he paid the price in his own humiliating death – a death that, paradoxically, would open the way for the fulfillment of God’s purpose. For “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

Christians Have Enemies

If Jesus had enemies, it comes as no surprise that his followers also have enemies, not just personal enemies but enemies of our faith. The psalms of imprecation can be useful reminders – if we need them – that many people today are prepared to accuse and attack the followers of Jesus. The twentieth century saw persecution of Christians around the world on a scale greater than ever, and it continues into this century.

Even terrorist acts of recent years may be understood as attacks on our faith. In the mind of these Jihadists there’s no difference between the influence of Western culture, which they regard as a threat to their way of life, and the Christian faith historically associated with the West. They might be surprised to learn that Christians, too, are often dismayed by the trends of Western culture, as reflected in films or other media. Like the speaker in the Psalms, faithful Christians can be falsely accused of complicity in the injustices of their society.

And, of course, there are those who understand perfectly well what the Christian faith teaches, but who oppose it because its norms don’t allow for their personal ambitions or lifestyle choices. Increasingly in North America, Christians and Christian institutions are coming under attack from these people. Of them, the apostle Paul wrote these words in his Letter to the Philippians that remind us of the psalms of imprecation:

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things (Philippians 3:18-19).

But while we, as Christians, may be attacked from outside our camp, the attack may come from the inside as well. Sadly, our accuser sometimes turns out to be a member of our own worshiping community, the person who might be sitting across the aisle or attending the same meeting. Consider Psalm 55:

*For it is not an enemy who taunts me —
then I could bear it;
it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me —
then I could hide from him.
But it is you, a man, my equal,
my companion, my familiar friend.
We used to take sweet counsel together;
within God’s house we walked in the throng (Psalm 55:12-14).*

Personal jealousies, disputes over nuances of doctrine, and slights real or imagined can destroy the unity of the body. We can become alienated from some of our fellow worshipers, or even from the whole congregation. At such times we might feel like praying this way, with Psalm 109:

*They encircle me with words of hate,
and attack me without cause.
In return for my love they accuse me,*

*but I give myself to prayer.
So they reward me evil for good,
and hatred for my love (Psalm 109:3-5).*

Identifying the Enemy

When we experience an attack, we need to know the real source of the accusation. Sometimes we can be our own worst enemy by giving in to negative and vindictive thoughts that aren't worthy of how the Lord has called his people to live. Asaph, the writer of Psalm 73, admits this when he realizes what he's been thinking.

*For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
All in vain have I kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.
For all the day long I have been stricken
and rebuked every morning.
If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have betrayed the generation of your children (Psalm 73:3-5, 13-15).*

So our accuser can be our own insecurity or self-condemnation. Before we lash out at others, tarnishing our Christian identity, we might recall the words of the cartoon character Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and they is us."

When we believe we've been wronged we face an emotional battle. Anger, vindictiveness, and discouragement can easily overtake us. But, whatever the human source of our trouble, the real battle is a spiritual one. Ultimately we're not contending with people but "against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). The "accuser of our brethren" does his best to undermine our Christian testimony. Our attackers may be in unwitting bondage to a hostile power. They may not understand what they're doing, or why. The evil one may be using both *their actions* and *our emotions* to try to undo the work of God. Jesus taught us to pray for deliverance from this evil one, and his brother James echoed our Lord's prayer when he encouraged us, "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7).

God's Answer

In the heat of emotion we're often tempted to take matters into our own hands, to seek vengeance against those who have attacked or wrongly accused us. From the psalms of imprecation we can learn a different response. For, however menacing the enemy, the speaker in these psalms never threatens to go after his accusers on his own. He always appeals to the Lord to execute justice. His defensive weapon is not the sword, but prayer, as in Psalm 35:

*Awake and rouse yourself for my vindication,
for my cause, my God and my Lord!
Vindicate me, O Lord, my God, according to your righteousness,
and let them not rejoice over me! (Psalm 35:23-24)*

And the worshiper is sure of the Lord's answer. Things may look bleak at the moment. But, in the end, if we leave justice to the Lord it will be done. We will have cause to be thankful. Psalm 109, probably the most vindictive of the psalms of imprecation, ends with this note of thanksgiving and confidence:

*With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord;
I will praise him in the midst of the throng.
For he stands at the right hand of the needy one,
to save him from those who condemn his soul to death (Psalm 109:30-31).*

As Christians we're called to live peaceably with all, whenever possible, and even to make peace with our accusers. Ideally we would like to make them our friends, but it doesn't always happen that way. Do we then appeal to the Lord for their undoing?

Historically, Christian theologians have said that the proper use of the psalms of imprecation is to pray not for the punishment of our enemies but for their conversion. If your adversary is outside the faith, pray that the light of Christ will break through to him or her. If your accuser is part of your own community, pray to find a way to deal with the causes for the attack that's being directed against you. Recall that your attacker may also be hurting. He or she may be desperately in need of the embracing love of the body of Christ. And maybe — just *maybe* — there might be things about us, after all, that could be corrected, in order to remove the source of the conflict!

Focusing at last on God's own greater glory and our devotion to him may be the best lesson we can learn from the psalms of imprecation. Ultimately, for those who pray in faith, justice and vindication will come from the Lord. Things will work out in the end; and if they aren't working out now, that just means this isn't the end! Whatever issues we face today, a better destiny remains in store for us. Psalm 73 puts the matter this way:

*I was brutish and ignorant;
I was like a beast toward you.
Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me to glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you (Psalm 73:22-25).*

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