

**SGF Pastors' Fellowship**  
**Pastorally Preaching the Imprecatory Psalms**

**Introduction**

One of the strangest jobs in the world must be that of White House Press Secretary. The job description must read, "Wanted: a capable communicator able to convince a room of cynical reporters that the President's most inane ideas, incompetent blunders, and idiotic statements are in fact brilliant concepts worthy of the mind of Aristotle, administered with the efficiency of ancient Rome, and so eloquently put as to be suitable for framing on the walls of living rooms around the world, when everyone knows they are stupid".

Many would think that trying to justify the existence of Imprecatory Psalms that call for little ones to be dashed against rocks falls into that same camp. There is, I suspect, considerable sympathy for Lewis' characterizing these Psalms as possessing "the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face...like the heat from a furnace mouth".<sup>1</sup>

Like me, you are possibly asking, "Why am I here?" just now. You might be convinced that "pastorally preaching the imprecatory Psalms" is such an oxymoron that you are already wishing this paper was not printed on two sides, rendering it useless even for scrap. Why are these meetings always on a Monday, the day of the week that I feel the least inclined to meditate on imprecations – or, perhaps more seriously, the day when they appeal to me the most!

It is not my intention to mount a defense of these texts. As has been ably remarked in the past, there is no need to defend a lion – just open its cage. I take the position of an evangelical who believes that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is therefore profitable. My place is to bow humbly before the text and be transformed by it.

There are some tools that hang in my garage that I reach for nearly every time I am out there – a screwdriver, adjustable wrench, or set of pliers; there are others that might hang there for months or years untouched, but occasionally a task will surface that requires that tool. I am not arguing that these texts will be used every time one reaches for his Bible; but they have a role to play, and we are seeking to discover what that might be.

Having said that, the language is obviously not what the vast majority of us use even in private speech, let alone in the pulpit. There are certain challenges relating to the commands to love our enemies; and there are those who take far too great delight in texts like these, from whom we wish to distance ourselves. If we could be warned of neglect last month in the matter of church discipline, because it is uncomfortable and unpleasant, I suspect that, were it not for occasional "read the Bible in a year" programs, most of these verses would not find much place in our lives. I am not aware of their being included in many Sunday School memory programs – and I am not sure I would want to be part of a church where they were.

Further, in addressing the topic of *preaching* these Psalms, I am not recommending a month of messages a year be devoted to them! What I am recommending will be saved for later – and in fact the idea of "*pastorally preaching*" them was handed to me, not created by me – but I do seem to recall the calming voice of Pastor Payne at these meetings intoning "Balance, brethren, balance!", and wish to speak in that spirit. By my count, using a generous definition, there are 33 Psalms that include at least a line calling for a removal of enemies – by no means are all of these imprecations or curses – which is quite a few, but still only a fifth of the Psalter; and when we focus our definition more consistently with prevailing lists, there are usually 10 or less included – and then, only rarely is the tone sustained for the whole Psalm.

It is the vehemence of the language that makes them stand out, of course, and much needs to be said on that, but my point here is to say that this is hardly the dominant theme of the Psalms, let alone Scripture. Like all truly Biblical preaching, our themes must not only be drawn from Scripture, but must reflect something of their place within Scripture, so that over a reasonable period of time, our preaching reflects the *balance* of themes in the Bible. It is ideal if a person who reads the Bible with good understanding would come away from a representative selection of our preaching with the same impressions and teaching – something like the "whole counsel of God".

To find *no* place for these texts, then, in our preaching cannot be right. But the goal is not to redress that balance in the next month, but to find the *right* place.

So why am I here? The only reason I felt I could accept this assignment was because I was at the time just completing a series of mid-week studies on the Psalms in which I dealt with the entire book in 65 sessions. As we have all been told

---

<sup>1</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, p.20.

since Seminary days, one advantage of systematic expositions of books is that it prevents our skipping over more difficult texts; and therefore I had thought about them, with the help of three commentaries that I read in full over the year and a half I spent with the Psalms.<sup>2</sup> I am sure that I need not say anything about time constraints to this group; because I have had less than 3 months since asked to do this, there have only been a handful of further resources I have been able to consult; there are many other treatments that are mentioned in the ones I did consult, but I could not follow up those leads.

Recognizing these limits, then, we will attempt to examine these texts, and see if we can show a number of ways that they can be of use in our preaching.

Even this early, we can draw two conclusions about why we ought to preach these Psalms. First, these texts are part of Scripture and are presupposed to be profitable, on the basis of 2 Timothy 3:16. Secondly, they should be understood properly, because there are those who would misuse these texts. If we neglect them, there are many fringe theologies and even heresies that specialize in so-called “obscure” texts, and hard passages, to justify hateful attitudes. If we leave a vacuum, something else will fill it.

There are dangers to avoid: it is obvious from a quick reading of New Testament exhortation passages that Christians have a problem with malice, envy and hatred. We must not inflame passions that are forbidden to us, but understand these texts in a way that fits the call to leave vengeance to the Lord. That is, my presupposition is that these texts are not anomalies, but integrate into the teaching of Scripture and the plan of redemption. It must also be noted that using these texts as definitive in my attitudes toward unbelievers, or my message to them, is also dangerous, when we do not safeguard the texts using their immediate context, and the broader text of Scripture. Obviously the format of preaching in Acts – which includes warning of judgment, but spends much more time on the details of the life and work of Christ, and the promises that follow repentance – is much more significant in answering such questions. After all, with one exception, the customary list of imprecatory Psalms are all prayers addressed to God, not to the person the Psalmist seeks to curse.

Before preaching comes understanding, so we must begin with an examination of the texts in question.

### **Examination: The Imprecatory Psalms**

The first challenge is to identify the texts. Although I have noted 33 passages<sup>3</sup> that at least look forward to the destruction of the enemies and the vindication of the Psalmist, the focus is really on 8 or 9 Psalms<sup>4</sup> that pray for the enemy to be cursed and destroyed with varying degrees of graphic detail on how that might be done. The problem for the evangelical is not the texts that state the *fact* of God’s wrath – for example, 5:4-6 *states* that God hates evildoers, and will destroy liars, abhorring bloodthirsty and deceitful men. The problem, rather, are texts where the *Psalmist* is the one who hates evildoers (Psalm 139:21-22), and the ones where he seems to allow his imagination to salivate over the details like a crazed psychopath (most notably, 58:6-10; 109:22-28; 137:8-9 – and note, incidentally, that this last is the exception to the rule that the imprecations are prayers). It is the attitude expressed in the NIV translation of 59:10, “God will go before me and will let me gloat over those who slander me”, that troubles us.

But what are the circumstances that prompt these statements, and what can we say about the attitudes that are actually expressed, the aims in view, and the actual activities of the Psalmists that might help us root out the central issues involved?

---

<sup>2</sup>See the Annotated Bibliography at the end for what I found most helpful

<sup>3</sup> My list: 2:4,9; 3:7; 5:5, 10; 7:14-16; 9:10-17; 10:15; 11:5; 17:13-14; 18:32-34, 37-42; 21:8-12; 28:4-5; 31:16-18; 35:5-9, 13, 17, 24, 26; 41:10; 54:5; 55:15; 58:6-11; 59:10; 68:1-2, 13, 19-23; 69:22-28; 70:2; 71:13; 79:5-6, 12; 83:9-18; 104:35; 109:6-20; 129:5-8; 137:8; 139:19-22; 140:8-11; 141:5, 10; 143:12; 144:5-8

<sup>4</sup>Meredith Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, p.161, identifies Psalms 7, 35, 55, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137 as imprecatory Psalms; most would add 139. Kline does precede the list with “for example”, indicating that he does not consider it exhaustive. His list does include the most vehement examples.

### Psalm 7

All but three of the eleven examples I have chosen here are penned by David, including this one, which some consider quite significant, because he can be viewed as writing not as a private individual but as the Anointed One. Some would underline the New Testament characterization of David as a prophet, and conclude that David is not speaking at all, but Christ through David, especially given the quotations by Christ of a couple of examples. We will return to this later.

Obviously, complete exegesis is not possible under our present constraints – after all, this is still preliminary to our aim of pastorally preaching these Psalms – and so I will give only a few observations and conclusions in each case.

1. The danger faced by David is actual, and serious enough to be considered potentially fatal (vv.1-2).
2. He recognizes in vv.3-5, 8 that calling for justice means that *he* will be judged justly – and he readily accepts this. Keep this point in mind when seeking to evaluate his attitudes, whether it is revenge and vindictiveness, or something else, as commentators frequently assert (again, more below).
3. His aim, therefore, really is *justice* – and this will be a repeated theme in these Psalms: but by the very nature of the case, “justice” *means* that God exercises wrath and removes the threat (vv.6-8, 11). The ultimate goal is that God will bring the violence of the wicked to an end, and make the righteous secure (v.9)
4. It is the nature of sin itself, and of God’s judgment on sin, that what the wicked intended comes back on their own heads (vv.14-16).
5. Motyer suggests that the “assembled peoples” of v.7 (NIV; “assembly of peoples”, ESV) has eschatological overtones<sup>5</sup>: David is effectively asking God to bring down the final verdict now, realizing that God may overlook sin for the time being, but not ultimately.

### Psalm 35

David once again reflects on the wickedness planned against him, and prays for his vindication from the Lord. The nature of sin to come back on the head of those who plan it is again seen here – if David prays for them to go down into the pit, it is the pit they had dug for David (vv.7-8). From this Psalm also, we can make some preliminary observations:

1. David did not start this fight: some are seeking to kill him (vv.1,4).
2. God has promised to be our salvation, and so David is asking him exactly for that – which means, of course, that his enemies be stopped (vv.2-3, 9-10).
3. The call for them to be blown away like chaff (v.5) also reflects the world view of Psalm 1: this is how God has said things should work, and David prays accordingly.
4. Their attacks on David are particularly malicious not only because they are vicious (v.11) and unprovoked (vv.7, 19-21), but because he had actually been good to them (vv.11-15).
5. That they rank among the wicked is not in dispute, walking in the counsel of mockers; David knows that they should perish, and so his question in prayer is “how long?” (Vv.16-17). As in Psalm 7, it is in the “great assembly” David wishes to see this (v.18).
6. It is not just personal: since David has identified with the Lord, and his persecutors have identified with the mockers, the battle lines are drawn. What conclusion will lovers of justice draw if David falls before those who love violence? He wants rather to see a world where it is those who love justice who triumph (vv.26-28). That it is David who writes this may well be significant for this public viewpoint.

### Psalm 55

If most of the Psalms under review in this paper are written by David, it is also true that all but one are prayers: whatever our goals for learning how to preach these Psalms, it is perhaps worth noting that their very character is that they were not initially being broadcast (although obviously included in this song book!), but brought to the Lord. Already some of our observations are sounding familiar:

1. David is suffering to the point of despair (vv.2-5)
2. His initial and preferred response is to flee (vv.6-8), but that is not an option open to him: we have here an

---

<sup>5</sup>Motyer, *New Bible Commentary*, p.492.

- indication that these Psalms are designed to teach us how to respond properly to this kind of brutal attack.
3. Significantly, one of the reasons why fleeing is not an option is that the problem is *not* merely personal, as vv.9-11 point out. If this was only about David, then fleeing would end the matter; but here, even if David fled, violence and injustice would still prevail in the city. Not only David is affected by the evil that has come against him.
  4. This situation is especially hurtful because it is a friend who betrayed him, and has done the most damage (vv.12-14). He is a “covenant-breaker” (vv.20-21), which is in texts like Malachi a sign that the whole of society is breaking down precisely because such evil exists.
  5. An important goal is suggested in vv.22-23 – that God’s people will cast their cares on the Lord, knowing that He will take care of them – and thus save them.
  6. The curse of 55:15 reflects what God had actually done to Korah and his fellow-rebels in Numbers 16.

### Psalm 58

The central matter concerns justice; David is crying out to God to maintain it in these Psalms, and we now see the reason for that: the rulers who are charged with maintaining justice under God are the very ones who have devised injustice.

1. Injustice is rooted in these characters from birth, and they have proved to be insensitive to the pleas of those who cry out: they are incorrigible, and will not hear the voice of the charmer (vv.2-5).
2. Several pictures are used to express the desire that these ones who have all the power and are abusing it would become powerless: teeth broken and fangs torn out, so they are as dangerous as toothless lions; they vanish like water in a desert; like a slug, they melt away, and like a stillborn child, there is no life in them: he wants them swept away before they do any further damage to himself or the “righteous”. They are to be swept away, and the righteous gain the military triumph, illustrated by bathing feet in their blood.
3. Once again, an aim is expressed in v.11: that men will draw the right conclusion about God’s universe: the righteous are rewarded, and there is a God who judges all the earth! This is the real reason the righteous are glad.

### Psalm 59

The matters raised in this Psalm are becoming familiar to us:

1. It is without cause that they lie in wait for David (vv.3-4).
2. The note of final judgment is seen in the punishment on the nations when God rises up (v.5).
3. If David wants to see the final curse fall on them, it is in response to their spouting of curses and lies (vv.12-13).
4. David fears the impact on the people if the wicked are not dealt with (v.11).
5. The aim is the true knowledge of God (v.13).

### Psalm 69

Along with Psalm 109, this is usually considered one of the two most egregious examples of imprecations, and yet readers of the New Testament will recognize both as sources of quotations explaining what happened to Christ and will happen to His followers! For now, however, we limit ourselves to a few observations:

1. He is being hated to death, without cause (vv.1-4), being accused unjustly before the courts, and finding no recourse or appeal (forced to pay back restitution when he had not stolen anything).
2. He is hoping only in the Lord, but so far there has been no response (v.3), and despair is mounting; it is just not right that those who hope in God would ultimately be ashamed and disgraced (v.6).
3. His orientation is toward God: he is zealous for the Lord’s house (vv.8-9), which again seeks to cut short the accusations often made that it is personal vindictiveness and desire for revenge that motivates David.
4. This means that he is *still* trusting only in the Lord (vv.13-18) – regardless of the silence of heaven – because he knows there is no help anywhere else (vv.19-21).
5. It is in this context that he calls down on the wicked and the unjust the covenant curses borrowed from Deuteronomy (vv.22-28) – and once again, it is possible to see that the curses called for are the intentions of the wicked coming back on their own heads. Motyer notes that “like most imprecations, these rest on the principle enunciated in Deuteronomy 19:19, that those who make false accusations will be judicially recompensed in

kind”<sup>6</sup>, and then proceeds to list 6 examples: if v.22 calls for his table to be a snare, note the violation of the table in v.21; if their back is to be bent forever (v.23), it only reflects the physical exhaustion they caused David (v.3); they made David feel as if God had abandoned him (v.17), and so he prays that they might be abandoned by God (v.24); they caused David to be estranged from his family (v.8), and thus he prays that their houses would be destroyed (v.25); if they accused him falsely of guilt (vv.4-5), then they should be held truly guilty and accountable (v.27); if they set themselves against God (v.9), then God should set Himself against them (v.28). While this does not tell us if this is a right response or not, at least for now we must observe that these curses are not just mindless fuming.

6. God’s answers to his prayer, given that David is standing with God, would encourage the people of God to seek Him and live, knowing that the Lord hears needy people, and answers their cry: in short, they will be glad and praise God (vv.30-36). Thus David’s aim in the imprecations is to bring glory to God.

### Psalm 79 and 83

These Psalms are of Asaph, possibly meaning his descendants or later generations of his type, given that the language seems to fit the time of the Babylonian captivity. The challenge is thus more international in scope, with the injustice perpetrated by godless nations against the covenant people, rather than by wicked Israelites against their brothers. We can treat them together since they share this theme.

1. The situation addressed is not unlike that of Habakkuk, where it is admitted that “we” do deserve the judgment that has come, and the anger of God has been just against His people, but the instruments of that judgment are actually far worse than the people are! Right now, the appearance suggests that God is siding with the *more wicked* nations.
2. Consequently, it is a call for God to protect His own Name by forgiving, delivering and restoring His people. The outcome is that the nations would know that the Lord is God, an important theme throughout the Old Testament, and so applied in a similar context throughout Ezekiel.
3. Essentially, the prayer is for a new Exodus-Conquest: hear the cries of the oppressed people of God, and set them free: pay back the reproach that the nations have brought on the “sheep” of God’s pasture, and they will give Him praise. The “exodus/conquest” language is even more evident in Psalm 83, where the prayer is that the God who once crushed Midian, Sisera, Oreb, Zeeb, and Zalmunna, who also tried to take over God’s land, would crush the present-day enemies allied against Israel – and by implication, against the Lord – 83:2, *Your* enemies.
4. Once again, the curse is that they be blown away like chaff.

### Psalm 109

Returning to David’s words and passions, this Psalm is linked to Psalm 69 by New Testament usage. Similar themes emerge.

1. The hatred that surrounds David is without cause (v.3).
2. As with some previous examples, David has demonstrated love for them, and true friendship. The added element here is the suggestion of the present tense: even as David is praying this Psalm, he is *acting* as a friend towards them, providing another reason why many commentators argue that he is not being vindictive or seeking personal revenge.
3. Further, he is not plotting how to overthrow his enemies: he wants them brought into a proper court (vv.6-7), and to have a fair trial – which of course means that they will be found guilty, for they really are doing these things.
4. The curses are particularly strong (vv.8-15) but once again, vv.16-18 shows that they are the very intentions the enemies themselves entertained, that should come back on their own heads.
5. He is asking God to do it – and indeed, wants the enemies to know that it is God’s hand at work as He was with Balaam and Ahithophel, to turn their curses into blessings (vv.27-28). Because God is just, the universe must be just, and that means God brings about the right outcome, overruling the will of men.

### Psalm 137

---

<sup>6</sup>New Bible Commentary, 20<sup>th</sup> Century edition, p.529.

This Psalm has no superscription, and thus no author noted. Like the examples from Asaph above (Psalms 79, 83), it is set in the time of Babylon's triumph. Like Obadiah, this Psalm recounts the contributions of Edom to their suffering: though distantly related to Israel, she stood by in glee as Babylon carried away the captives: the Psalm wants the Lord to "remember" this, not to let this pass. Verses 8-9 are addressed to Babylon – the only example that is not a prayer addressed to God, although it is not that likely that it was actually heard by Babylon either!

### Psalm 139

Finally, this Psalm is not really noted for its curse – although in v.19, he is asking God to slay the wicked. The more significant point is the contrast with the command of Jesus to "love your enemies", when David declares his hatred for those who hate the Lord: he has nothing but hatred for them, and counts them his enemies (vv.20-22)

But by way of observation, we should notice that in this example, the "enemies" are *not* David's enemies for any reason other than they are the *Lord's* enemies. There is no record of anything that they have done to David, except blasphemed his God. That he has nothing but hatred for them becomes, then, an emphatic declaration of his love for God, and uncompromising allegiance to Him.

The Psalm attracts attention because it is such a glorious and pleasing Psalm with this one note that strikes many as jarring, out of place. But that is not a necessary reading, especially since David calls for the searchlight of God's holiness to examine himself (vv.23-24).

These observations can be summarized in terms of the aim, attitude and actions of the writers.

First, the aim of these imprecations is to see the justice of God at work. It is the clear testimony of the Scripture that God is just, but the reality is that this justice is not always evident, and not always quick. In many cases, a more specific aim is not stated, but always deliverance from unjust oppression is the primary goal. There are a few other things that are explicitly mentioned – that the Lord would be known as God over all the earth; that the righteous would be glad; that the Lord would be praised.

Second, in seeking this aim, we observed evidence that the Psalmist, though obviously angry and distraught, is not primarily registering selfishness or personal vindictiveness. There is a public element to his sufferings that will discourage others from the way of godliness, if something is not done.

Third, the actual actions of the Psalmist are instructive. He *prays*: he does not take up arms, he does not set traps, he does not try to get even: he prays. And where there are references to his actions towards his enemies, they are actions of love and kindness, even friendship from his side – and as we saw in Psalm 109, there is evidence that this is a present reality.

Although it was not a Psalm we examined, Psalm 94 does touch on this theme of justice and gives some perspectives. Particularly important is the clear admission that vengeance belongs to God – important, because the curses are often thought to violate exactly this principle. The cry, "how long?" is again found on the lips of suffering people of God: in this case, how long will the wicked remain jubilant? This is not right – it is not just. Upon examination, the writer uncovers a reason for their wicked actions: they do not believe that God can see them (v.7). The very idea that God does not know what is going on is ludicrous for the Psalmist – and he appeals to creation to prove it (vv.8-11). But however foolish to think this way, it appears that the wicked are right, because God has not yet acted against them! He appreciates that the Lord disciplines the godly so that they do not fall prey to such foolishness (vv.12-15), but this cannot go on indefinitely: to borrow a line that I have come across repeatedly in Carson's writings, justice will be done, and will be seen to be done.<sup>7</sup>

### *Explanation*

Our aim in this survey has been to provide a foundation from the Psalms themselves to seek an explanation of their message: what are they trying to say to us? As we grapple with the themes, and seek to place them within the broader context of Scripture, it should become a little clearer what we should be doing with them, if anything, in our preaching.

---

<sup>7</sup>D.A.Carson, many times: note for example, *Love in Hard Places*, p.51; *For the Love of God, Vol. 1, October 20*; and especially, the extensive treatment in *How Long, O Lord?* pp.139-140

An explanation is particularly sought for justifying the kinds of fierce curses from a godly man against the wicked in light of various other Biblical principles. Because the teaching of Jesus to love our enemies is so well known, it is sometimes assumed that these curses can be relegated to the (implied: inferior) morality of the Old Testament; we can simply argue that they do not belong on the lips of a Christian. This is essentially the message of C. S. Lewis, although he does seek to come to learn some lessons from them that are legitimate, even if the words (Lewis believes) are not.<sup>8</sup>

Motyer makes it clear that excising these Psalms as a liberal would, or dismissing them as Old Testament morality now outmoded by the coming of Christ are illegitimate answers, given that, first, similar sentiments are found in the New Testament also, making the problem *Biblical*, not Old Testament;<sup>9</sup> that the Old Testament does urge love and the returning of good for evil and rejection of vengeance on our own part;<sup>10</sup> and that the imprecations occur side by side with a spirituality that we envy, as in Psalm 139.<sup>11</sup>

Early on in the history of the church, there was a turn to allegorical interpretations of all kinds of Old Testament passages. When coming to these curses, the “enemies” were so taken, that they were referring to the heart sins that trip up believers in Jesus. If I am addressing my own lust, the objections to spouting such curses evaporates. One summary puts it this way: “Although the curses in the Psalms are directed at literal, human enemies, Origen reads them as targeting the enemies of the moral or spiritual life – our vices, in particular, but also our spiritual (demonic) opponents. ...In Psalm 137, the exiles’ taunting captors remind Origen of demons, who (he recounts) mock Christians when they sin; to dash the ‘little ones’ of Babylon is to use the teachings of Christ to destroy one’s own evil thoughts.”<sup>12</sup>

By the time of Augustine, this sort of treatment was on the wane; Augustine himself understood the whole of the Psalms as a prophetic book by and about the Lord Jesus. The emphasis here is on the *whole* of the Psalms, not just so-called “Messianic” examples.<sup>13</sup> A modern representative of this view is James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*. It is based on i) the New Testament perspective of David as a prophet, especially seen with respect to Psalm 16, where Peter and Paul both argue that David could not have been speaking personally: his body never left the tomb; ii) the large number of quotations from the Psalms that obviously do apply to Christ; iii) the position of David as the “anointed one” makes his life as a whole typological; and iv) the Psalms where David speaks of being “perfect” or “righteous”, which obviously he personally was not. Of course, the “penitential” Psalms seem to speak against the view, but here Christ is seen as our Substitute, which again is obviously true;<sup>14</sup> and the fact that many Psalms are *not* labeled as “of David” is dismissed, because David is taken as in some sense responsible for the form, if not each Psalm.

The value of so reading the Psalms is that it enriches our understanding of Christ,<sup>15</sup> and – concerning the matter of the imprecations – sees Christ as the appointed Judge. Where a human being, even the most godly example of a Christian, would necessarily fall prey to evil thoughts in speaking words like this, Christ obviously would not: He truly could speak

---

<sup>8</sup>C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, p.22. Lewis refers to the language of the Psalms as variously comically naive (p.20), diabolical (p.21), contemptible, wicked (p.22), devilish (p.25)

<sup>9</sup>Galatians 1:8-9; Revelation 6:10; 18:20; 19:1-3; Matthew 11:20-23; 23:13-36.

<sup>10</sup>Leviticus 19:17-18; Psalms 7:3-5; 35:12-14; Deuteronomy 32:3; Proverbs 20:22.

<sup>11</sup>New Bible Commentary, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Edition, p.488.

<sup>12</sup>John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible With the Dead*, pp.54-55.

<sup>13</sup>What with one thing and another, I have yet to read Augustine: I am relying on Thompson’s summary *ibid.*, pp.56-59.

<sup>14</sup>James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*, p.29. Note in the comments that follow that I only gained access to this book very recently, and did not have time to digest it fully.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, pp.27, 30

these words without vindictiveness absolutely. I cannot pray these Psalms in my own voice,<sup>16</sup> but can pray to Christ the Judge in light of these Psalms.

Although we will come to some of the same conclusions by a slightly different route, this view seems to me to fall short of proof. Explaining the penitential Psalms as only speaking of Christ does not acknowledge the historical setting sufficiently; the multitude of quotations from the Psalms is not spread evenly through all the Psalms – and, notably, the penitential Psalms are not so quoted; the nature of typology itself speaks against the “either/or” approach: 2 Samuel 7, for example, obviously speaks of Christ – but that does not mean that there is *no* reference to Solomon or David’s line. It seems better to me to recognize that it is David’s voice, at least as the titles warrant, but to realize that his experiences as a believer, and especially as King, were pointing to Christ. And in many cases, his speaking did outrun his experience in such a way that only Christ really satisfies the language.

What is decidedly helpful, and important to notice, is that the two imprecatory Psalms often labeled as “the worst”,<sup>17</sup> Psalms 69 and 109, are in fact quoted by and about Christ – Psalm 69 especially outlines much of the sufferings of Christ, and is very much on the minds of the Gospel writers as they approach the cross. Peter takes these curses as the foundation for action against Judas, and the pursuit of a successor for him among the apostles. And I think also significantly, being hated without a cause will explain the conduct of the wicked against the disciples of Christ as well (John 15:18-25).

It is evidence like this that drives Lewis to find some use for these curses, as much as he finds the actual language abhorrent. In his memorable phrase, these curses will not “come away clean”:<sup>18</sup> the jarring statement about hating those who are the Lord’s enemies comes in the other-wise much admired Psalm 139, for example. Glorious statements of faith that every Christian would want to own lie side by side with “contemptible” curses.

It seems to me, then, there is some help in framing these Psalms within their increasingly broad context, starting with the Psalms as a whole.

While obviously the nature of the Psalms as a collection means that outlining them is largely a waste of time, there are ways of tracing some broad themes. It is often understood that Psalm 1 (and maybe Psalm 2 with it) introduces the whole collection. It lays out the “world view” of the Psalms (and the Bible, of course) rather bluntly: the blessed man is the one who delights in the law of the Lord, and abhors the ways of the ungodly. It is that blessed man who flourishes like a tree by the water – unlike the wicked driven away by the Lord like chaff. This is the way the world works, as created and ruled by a just God: the Lord knows the way of the righteous; the way of the ungodly will perish.

Clear enough; but then the questions start. I am surrounded by foes, even when I am being godly (3:1). At times I am not godly – so does that mean I must perish with the wicked (51)? By Psalm 12, we are surrounded by liars; by Psalm 13, we are already crying in pain, “How long?”. God stands “far away”, and is silent. Psalm 44 is one of only a few unresolved Psalms: we are counted as sheep for the slaughter – and there is no end to talk about. About half way through, we find ourselves sitting beside Asaph, wondering if he is right – have we cleansed our hands in vain (73)? Some<sup>19</sup> would take the promises of Psalm 91 to mean that we should expect this kind of care right now – if we are not kept safe in this way, it is due to our lack of faith; but that just does not meet the case, as many other Psalms declare: the righteous do suffer.

Psalms of David are thick on the ground at the beginning of the book, going by the superscriptions; as we near the end, he resurfaces, Psalm 138 to 145, with a final 8 words on this theme. By Psalm 144, however, praise is winning out. The questions have been asked, and the Lord as refuge has been proved trustworthy. There is no reason to fear that God will not come through, and it is impossible that, in the end, the wicked will triumph as long as God is enthroned – and

---

<sup>16</sup>“Without assistance, how can we ever righteously pray this prayer? I answer this question unequivocally: we never can!” Adams, p.56.

<sup>17</sup>For example, Lewis, p.20.

<sup>18</sup>“One way of dealing with these terrible or (dare we say?) contemptible Psalms is simply to leave them alone. But unfortunately the bad parts will not ‘come away clean’”, pp.21-22.

<sup>19</sup>I was once given a recorded message by Gloria Copeland to this effect on this Psalm suggesting that it is a lack of faith to worry about locking your doors, or buying insurance.



that is from everlasting to everlasting. Five anonymous Psalms end the collection, and all is praise: the notes of doubts and fears are gone; the God who made us cares for us still; the God who gave us His Word can be trusted. Everything that has an ounce of life left in it must praise the Lord!

In this, then, the Psalms are the microcosm of the message of the Bible. It begins “very good”, but we wrestle with the impact of sin that has corrupted everything, and left creation groaning in pain. But the Lord is God; though the nations rage against His anointed, they really should kiss the Son and give Him honour, because He will not be denied His glory. Those who persist in their rebellion cannot stand. Psalm 37 ends with the Psalmist going for a walk; on his daily outing he passed a huge overspreading tree, old and apparently permanent. One day, he walked by and it was gone. There was no evidence it had ever been there. The wicked are like that: we fret because they are apparently permanent, powerful and incorrigible. One day, they will be gone, along with all evidence that they were ever here.

Given this flow, is it wrong to ask, “thy kingdom come”? Is it not this that is the meaning of these Psalms? Let us attempt to itemize our explanation of the Psalms.

First, with a nod to Carson, justice will be done and will be seen to be done. God is apparently not ashamed of this aspect of His character, if I might reverently say so. In our observations, we noticed that there were one or two references to Israel’s past history – the way God had dealt with enemies like Midian and Sisera before; the way God dealt with Egypt above all. If I ask God that the ground would open up and swallow the wicked, perhaps I am simply reflecting on what God did to Korah. Psalm 137 expresses itself in uncomfortable ways, but if it be compared with Jeremiah 51:49-64, we see very similar themes: Babylon must fall for the slain of Israel, because the Lord is a God of recompense: He will surely repay. What is to happen to Babylon is what Babylon has done – again, the repeated theme of these imprecations, that wickedness planned comes back on the one who planned it. The destroyer will come upon Babylon with the fury with which she had destroyed the nations. When that happens, it will be clear that the Lord has done it; Babylon will sink like a stone in the river.

Ignoring for a moment the brutality of the desire (which, of course, likely reflects on Babylon’s actions in the conquest), what is the alternative if justice is not seen to be done? Psalm 12:8 declares that the “wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honoured among men”, and Psalm 14 details the violent oppression that follows when there is no fear of God, as evildoers devour God’s people like a loaf of bread. If, then, the justice of God is both certain, and ultimately good, is it wrong to ask for it and desire it? Lewis would argue that the curses and the expressed hatred are the *natural* reaction to injury, and that is the point to be drawn; but is it not more likely that this is the *spiritual* reaction? He would suggest that the fury of their reaction is in fact a measure of their spirituality, since only those who really care about justice would react so vehemently, but still contends that the response itself is not spiritual.<sup>20</sup> But woe to us if God is not just, and seen to be just.

Secondly, our observations point to threads that run through Scripture. Many of these curses are reflecting the basic principle found in Deuteronomy 19:19, that the punishment for a man intending evil upon a neighbour is the intended evil. Regardless of the evaluation of this principle some might give, there is no doubt that this was a legal statute in Israel. So if, as we saw for example with Psalm 69, the curses are reflecting the damage done, there is a certain connection with the crime. This is to demonstrate the view of God against the crime, and dissuade others from doing the same.

Further, the whole idea of a curse comes from God at the time of the very first human sin. This is reflected in the Law in Leviticus 26, Deuteronomy 27, which curses are to be pronounced from Mount Ebal, and Deuteronomy 28:15-68. The list of curses sounds very much like the imprecations, for this is a people and a land holy to the Lord. If repentance does not follow the initial punishments, then punishment times seven follows. James Adams quotes this last text, and compares it with the curses of Psalm 109:9-10, 13-15, pointing out that “these are the very curses that the psalmist invokes upon the enemies of the Lord’s Anointed in his day. Remember, he is not praying for his personal cause, but rather that God’s cause would prevail by the carrying out of His covenant promises. It is evident from his plea in Psalm 109 that the psalmist has this acute curse upon the ‘fruit of the womb’ of covenant breakers in mind.”<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup>Lewis, pp.24-26.

<sup>21</sup>Adams, *War Psalms*, p.70.

So when the prophets have their say, it is in light of these curses: good should not be repaid with evil, Jeremiah notes (18:19-23). When Psalm 68 looks forward to the coronation of God on His holy mountain, the language of verse 1 for the enemies of God to be scattered is taken from Numbers 10:35, once again the language of exodus and conquest. This is the God before whom no one can stand.

It should not be a surprise, then, to find that these Psalms provide explanation for what happened in the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus. It is true that He was betrayed by the one who ate with Him at the table, and that they hated Him without cause. They viciously sought to bring Him down, though He was good to them. His betrayer will find that another shall take his place – as Peter saw in Acts 1:20, where he quotes both Psalms 69:25 and 109:8. This victory of the Lord Jesus therefore crushed His enemies, and He ascended on high, as Psalm 68 said He would (see Ephesians 4:7-10).

Those who follow Jesus should expect nothing else than that same hatred, as Jesus pointed out in John 15:25, drawing from the parallel statements in Psalms 35:19 and 69:4. Therefore it is not surprising if Christians are found to be crying out, “How long, O Lord?” from under their oppression, awaiting that vindication that shows that evil cannot triumph, and that they were truly following the Lamb.

Thirdly, this leads to a most important aspect in understanding these Psalms, and applying them: the strong eschatological note that they imply. Already we noted Motyer’s view that the “assembly”, as well as the judgment on the nations, looked forward to final judgment: that David was really asking that God render that verdict now.

Meredith Kline presented the idea of the “intrusion” to help Christians wrestle with not only the language of these Psalms, but also startling events like the wiping out of the Canaanites in the Conquest.<sup>22</sup> The whole thesis he presents is beyond our scope, but the idea is that when someone is saved, the “age to come” breaks in to this “present evil age”. At times, the New Covenant realities burst briefly onto the pages of the Old – hence “intrusion”, not really belonging to the nature of the times. Thus the ethics of the Old Testament reflect the intrusion of ultimate realities of blessing and cursing. When the Canaanites are wiped out, it is *not* the present “norm” during this time of common grace when God is displaying patience, but it *will be* the “norm” when the End comes: then there is no mercy and no escape.

He would suggest, in a brief reference to the imprecations, that they, too, reflect an intrusion of the “End”. Thus, normally the believer’s attitude to the unbeliever is to be conditioned by the “principle of common grace...before the secret election of God is unmistakably manifested at the great white throne, the servants of Christ are bound to pray for the good of those who despitefully use and persecute them...We may not seek to destroy those for whom, perchance, Christ has died. But in the final judgment the Lord will not rebuke...similar requests. Then it will be altogether becoming for the saint to desire God’s wrath to descend upon his unbelieving enemy”.<sup>23</sup>

Whatever we think of Kline’s thesis as a whole, there is this distinct hope that the Lord will vindicate His people (Psalm 135:14). This is the hope that enables the suffering one to endure, as Asaph illustrates in Psalm 73, when he understood the “end” of those who seem to be living simultaneously in evil and in ease at the present. That march of God Moses referred to in Numbers 10:35 carries on in an unbroken path to Zion in Psalm 68, and on to the ascension of Christ to glory in Ephesians 4, until all opposition is crushed and Jesus is seen to be the undisputed Lord by all. But though that can be traced through the Scripture, the reality still stands that there are many apparent set-backs – apparent, that is, to us. Will any of these set-backs prove fatal?

The answer, of course, is “no”: nothing will stop the Lord reaching His goal. His oppressed people will often ask, “How long?”, but whether we know the time or not, it is known to the Lord.

What needs to be clear in our thinking is the connection between mercy and judgment, between the ultimate completion of redemption, and the final end for the ungodly. This is why the closing chapters of the Bible have certain parallels with the imprecations of the Psalms. As in Psalms 79, 83 and 137, Babylon is the villain, the one that has oppressed the people of God, eagerly working for their destruction. About the similar call to rejoice in the fall of Babylon in Revelation 18:20, Leon Morris comments that this

appals some modern students. But we should notice in the first place that this is not a vindictive outcry. It is a

---

<sup>22</sup>“The Intrusion and the Decalogue” in *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, pp.154-171.

<sup>23</sup>Kline, pp.161-162.

longing that justice be done. And in the second, John and his readers were not armchair critics pedantically discussing rights and wrongs in an academic fashion....They had staked their lives on the truth of the Christian faith....It was the Almighty God with whom they had cast their lot. This meant great suffering here and now. It meant that they were persecuted and despised. But it meant also that they were sure of ultimate vindication...It is a passionate cry uttered out of the deep conviction that right must triumph and which eagerly welcomes that triumph.<sup>24</sup>

He further notes 19:2 with its call to rejoice in both the downfall of evil and the reign of God, because they are woven together: mercy and judgment go hand in hand, as also in 21:9.<sup>25</sup>

And this is what James Adams is getting at by pointing us to Christ. Here is where the conflict reaches its fevered pitch, where the horrifying wickedness of the world that knew Him not bears its full fruit. Jesus, more than any other, ought to have been not only welcomed and loved, but worshiped and honoured with full obedience. With wicked hands, we killed Him. Through astonishing grace, He forgives all who call on Him, but the finally incorrigible will be crushed under foot.

So he asks, concerning the request Jesus taught us to pray, “you kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven”, “can we truly utter this prayer without perceiving that our request involves the complete overthrow of Satan’s kingdom and all his followers?” He adds, “when we pray as Jesus taught us, we cry out to God for His blessings upon His church *and for His curses upon the kingdom of the evil one*”.<sup>26</sup>

To pray for salvation is to pray that all enemies will be crushed. If we long for the fulness of salvation, texts like 2 Peter 3 teach us that this means we are looking for – longing for – these heavens and earth to be destroyed, because we look for the one that is the home of righteousness. To cry out, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” is to call for the very judgments anticipated on “Babylon” to fall.

Implied by all this is the fact that the New Testament does not speak less of wrath, but more. Everything is more intense — and therefore the love of God is so much more evident in the cross, that it becomes the new definitive expression of love. But if that be so, the wrath of God is also that much more intense, now that our anger against God is fully expressed. Kidner notes that the “whole scale of human destiny has come into sight” now that Christ has come, and thus there is “sorer punishment”, pointing out that David’s cry for relief in Psalm 6:8 becomes a sentence of death in Matthew 7:23.<sup>27</sup>

Fourthly, how do we relate these Psalms to the command to love our enemies? In part, we have already given part of the answer, that there is a distinction between “now” and “not yet”; there will come the day when the judgment of the foes of God and His people will be fully poured out, but in the mean time, even these warnings aim at repentance.

But Carson has done considerable work on the subject of the complexity of God’s love, and thus, by implication, the complexity of ours.<sup>28</sup> It is beyond our scope to review this at any extent; but just as the love of God must be understood in a comprehensive way that allows for all the evidence – such as the fact that God does hate sin, and will certainly judge – so our love must operate in such a way that it does not lose its grounding in justice. After making remarks on the prayer, “your kingdom come”, he writes

that Christians experience an unavoidable tension. On the one hand, they are called to abandon bitterness, to be forbearing, to have a forgiving stance even where the repentance of the offending party is conspicuous by its absence; on the other hand, their God-centred passion for justice, their concern for God’s glory, ensure that the

---

<sup>24</sup>Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, Tyndale NTC., Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1969, pp.221–222.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., pp.225, 248.

<sup>26</sup>James Adams, *War Psalms*, p.52.

<sup>27</sup>Kidner, p.30.

<sup>28</sup>*The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God and Love in Hard Places* respectively.

awful odium of sin is not glossed over. The former stance without the latter quickly dissolves into a mushy sentimentality that forgets how vile sin is; the latter stance without the former easily hardens into rigid recriminations, self-righteous wrath, unbending retaliation.<sup>29</sup>

Carson points out in the second of the two works, *Love in Hard Places*, that “as I argued in the previous book, the Bible can simultaneously affirm God’s wrath toward people and his love for them: it does not intimate that God’s love and his judicial “hatred” are necessarily mutually exclusive. So why should love and hatred be exclusive in us?”<sup>30</sup>

At least for our purposes, as we move toward the point of this paper and consider the pastoral preaching and use of these Psalms, it is necessary to show that the attitude of these Psalms, rightly understood and contextually limited, is not significantly different from the broad themes of certain passages in the New Testament, meaning that we cannot dismiss them just because they belong to the Old Testament. This is not in any way to deny that the coming of the Lord Jesus is a monumental change; but neither do we need to say that only Christ could speak and pray this way, or that only conversion is in view, or that they are somehow sub-Christian. Piper points out that “what is unique in the New Testament paraenesis is the new eschatological context in which the teachings on enemy love are put and the selective use of the Old Testament to avoid possible misunderstandings to which the Old Testament admixture of love and hate was so susceptible”.<sup>31</sup>

More could be said in terms of seeking to explain what these Psalms are about; but already in these comments we are drifting towards the application of them in our preaching and pastoral work. So to the matter at hand: what important lessons are found here that are needed for our people?

### **Edification: Pastoral Preaching of Imprecatory Psalms**

A couple of general comments should perhaps be made. On the one hand, we must be prepared to preach that which is unpopular and hard. Commenting on Ezekiel’s commission in Ezekiel 2, Carson wrote,

But in declining times, those who truly speak for God will be taunted and threatened. The pressures to dilute what God says become enormous. Clever exegesis to make the text say what it really doesn’t, selective silence to leave out the painful bits, hermeneutical cleverness to remove the bite and sting of Scripture, all become *de rigueur*, so that we can still be accepted and even admired. But God is aware of the danger. From his perspective, success is not measured by how many people Ezekiel wins to his perspective, but by the faithfulness with which he declares God’s words.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, these Psalms are clearly open for abuse. Motyer, whose balance I particularly appreciate, wrote on Psalm 109, that we tend to retreat into a more general prayer that God will deal with our enemies: but must recognize *how* God will deal with enemies is as He has revealed in Scripture! He adds, “our retreat is understandable and accords with Paul’s caution (Eph.4:26) that allowable anger is near neighbour to sin”.<sup>33</sup> So we must be faithful to Scripture without falling prey to unwarranted anger or neglect of Jesus’ call to love our enemies.

First, these Psalms demonstrate the *sinfulness of sin*. Even Lewis sees this as a great value of these curses: “the ferocious parts of the Psalms serve as a reminder that there is in the world such a thing as wickedness and that it (if not its perpetrators) is hateful to God”.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup>Carson, *Love in Hard Places*, pp.83-84.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p.42.

<sup>31</sup>John Piper, *Love Your Enemies*, p.34. This is Piper’s doctoral thesis, and another example of the limits of time is that I was able only to look at a couple of sections of this work.

<sup>32</sup>Carson, *For the Love of God*, Vol.2, 1999, Crossway Books, Wheaton, Ill., devotional for August 30.

<sup>33</sup>Motyer in *New Bible Commentary*, p.559.

<sup>34</sup>Lewis, p.33.

Although commenting on the deaths of Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10, Wenham made a rather blunt point that I believe to be relevant to this theme:

These glaring contrasts are upsetting to the cosy bourgeois attitudes that often pass for Christian. In many parts of the church the biblical view of divine judgment is conveniently forgotten or supposed to be something that passes away with the OT. Heine's famous last words, "God will forgive me. That's his job," have become the unexpressed axiom of much modern theology. This short story is therefore an affront to liberal thinkers. It should also challenge Bible-believing Christians whose theological attitudes are influenced by prevailing trends of thought more often than they realize.<sup>35</sup>

Motyer again: "We who suffer from moral atrophy, who have little capacity for true moral indignation, and who are ever-ready for moral compromise, have no conception what sin really is, how it appears to and offends a holy God and how just is even the most apparently savage retribution."<sup>36</sup>

It is the task of the pastor to understand the dominant needs of his people, and determine which themes are particularly needed to redress the balance of truth, but given the nature of our society, where "sinful" and "decadent" are more likely used as positive characteristics of pastry than any reasonable criticism of morality, it is not impossible that, as these quotes suggest, that we need to remember the sinfulness of sin; there is little doubt that these Psalms at least are adept at that! Where Paul employs the language of the curse, then, it is when there is startling complacency over "another Gospel", or over the failure to consider heinous sin a crime, as in 1 Corinthians. There is therefore strong warning to believers who would think lightly of their sin, or unbelievers who see no reason to flee the wrath to come in these texts.

Secondly, we must understand the pain of those who suffer injustice, oppression and violence, and entertain the notion that, given that these Psalms came out of exactly those circumstances, they might have something to say to fellow-sufferers.

Carson suggests that at least some of the extreme language of these Psalms might in fact be labeled "rhetoric of outrage", of the type found in Jeremiah 20:14-18, where Jeremiah wishes that he had never been born. He writes, Does Jeremiah *really* want his mother to be forever pregnant? Only the crassest literalist could read the text in this way.

To cut the passage from the text on the ground that it is irresponsible would be a great loss, for the vividness of the outrage would be diluted were it replaced by a bland abstraction such as 'Jeremiah is deeply disturbed'...Jeremiah makes us *feel* the heat of his indignation; cautious literalism could not achieve so much.

It follows that we must ask whether some of the malediction language in the psalms is in the same way not the language of considered address but the rhetoric of outrage. Its purpose is not to inform but to ignite; it has little in common with cool discourse, a great deal in common with a sudden scream.<sup>37</sup>

Kidner comments that the theme of Psalm 137 comes across in Romans 2:1-5 in a more "cool" form; but Psalm 137 comes to us "white hot".<sup>38</sup> Carson uses the same language on that text saying that "these white-hot lines are not cool policy statements, but the searing cries of moral indignation. We must hear the anguish, before we also hear God insisting that vengeance is his (Rom.12:19)."<sup>39</sup> Preaching these Psalms pastorally will mean that, whatever else must also be said, suffering is horrific in this fallen world, and God knows it, and will answer it.

Of course, that message is not the personal vindictiveness and malice that is our first natural response; but what is

---

<sup>35</sup>Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT, Eerdmans, p.153.

<sup>36</sup>

Motyer, p.528.

<sup>37</sup>D.A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord?*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI., 1990

<sup>38</sup>Kidner, p.461.

<sup>39</sup>D.A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, Vol.2, devotional for November 7.

that message?

This paper has not done more than mention the New Testament curses; it is important, however, to acknowledge their existence before we too eagerly dismiss these as pre-Christian themes. But especially interesting is Paul's language in 2 Thessalonians 1-2, which along with the above passages in Revelation sound very much like these Psalms. Beyond demonstrating that there is some Christian use of these themes, 2 Thessalonians and Revelation both focus on the End, and both are designed to encourage and comfort suffering believers. And just like the Psalms of imprecation the comfort comes from knowing that the universe will ultimately be just, because God is just. Once again, Carson, writing on 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8, underlines that

"God is just" (1:6). Therefore there will be payback time for those who have cruelly oppressed his people (1:7) and ignored his Word (1:8). When Christ returns he "will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (1:8). What is presupposed is that the perfections of God's justice are not manifest until Jesus returns. Some outworking of his justice is displayed in this broken world, but let's face it: in this world, many evil people seem to get away with a lot, and many people of extraordinary goodness suffer a lot. Wise parents often tell their children, "Life isn't fair. Don't expect it to be". Yet at the same time, God is "fair", he is perfectly just. But do not expect his justice to be manifested in instantaneous rewards and retribution. His time scale is not ours. Life isn't fair on our time scale. When Jesus returns, however, not only will justice be done, it will be seen to be done.<sup>40</sup>

While a pastor does not have to experience everything his people have in order to speak to their need, there is some wisdom to Motyer's caution regarding Psalm 69 that "before we criticize a prayer like this we must be sure that we have ourselves been in a like place of suffering".<sup>41</sup> He goes on to remind us that this Psalm is clearly reflecting the sufferings of Christ, and that His response was to pray, "Father forgive them". He continues,

Surely this is now the only possible course. But there is more to be said: the Lord Jesus himself pronounced dire 'woes' (Mt.23:13-36); he envisaged himself saying 'Depart, you who are cursed' (Mt.25:41; the day will come when all will flee the wrath of the Lamb (Rev.6:15-17); he will be there when the books are opened (Rev.20:12) – and at that day there will be no prayer for forgiveness, only the logic of divine justice eternally applied.

John Thompson explains the position that Calvin maintained, building on the themes of predestination and reprobation. Only those finally reprobate can be considered "enemies", given that God might yet save one who is currently acting as an enemy. But by underlining their final destiny, if they remain enemies of Christ and His church, it assures suffering believers that God cares for them, thus preventing them from taking matters into their own hands. Thomson quotes Calvin on Psalm 109, "by imparting comfort to us, he mitigates and moderates our sorrow, so that we patiently endure the ills which they inflict upon us". Thompson then draws this conclusion concerning Calvin's understanding of predestination: "here is a fine opportunity to see it used as Calvin intended: to remind Christians of their need for faith, humility, and neighbor-love, even when a neighbor is unjust; but to remind them even more that their heavenly Father reigns, and injustice is doomed".<sup>42</sup>

Thompson's own conclusions on how modern readers should view these Psalms includes the fact that they prove to us that God does care about injustice and suffering: "For many of these commentators the heat and hatred of the psalmists is uncomfortable, but God's response is sure and full of comfort for the Psalmist and for contemporary readers and hearers as well".<sup>43</sup>

Thirdly, this last consideration leads us to see that these Psalms can help us understand the grounds on which we love

---

<sup>40</sup>Carson, *For the Love of God*, Vol.1, devotional for October 20.

<sup>41</sup>Motyer, p.529.

<sup>42</sup>Thompson, pp.65-66.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p.68

our enemies. What is obvious to suffering believers is that Christians are already decidedly vulnerable as a minority; by commanding us to love our enemies, it is as if Jesus has taken away the option of self-defense. This is a scary place to be; we need encouragement and understanding of the area of eschatology to help us comply.

Before considering how this is so, it must be understood that the command to love our enemies must never become a complacent attitude toward evil, and as we noted above, these Psalms go some way to prevent such “bourgeois attitudes”. Michael Wilcock comments particularly on the role and lessons of the Imprecatory Psalms in connection with Psalm 35, by quoting Romans 12:9, itself alluding to Amos 5:15, that we must “hate what is evil”. “In a world where much really is hateful and where many things, and people, richly deserve our indignation, easy-going Christians could learn something from David’s passion. There is plenty of moral outrage expressed today by hypocritical people in inappropriate directions, but not nearly enough of it where it is needed”<sup>44</sup>, and we might add, that to *fail* to express outrage is not particularly loving. In commenting on Paul’s defense of the Gospel in Galatians 1, that includes an imprecation, and his willingness to challenge even Peter on that point in Galatians 2, Carson points out that the Gospel Paul defends

has been brought about by the love of Christ (2:20); it is this gospel that produces the fruit of the Spirit, which includes love (5:22); it is the freedom of the gospel that produces transformed behavior, characterized by the love that sums up the law (5:13-14). Passionate love for the Galatians forces Paul to take such pains to guard the gospel (4:17-20). Not for an instant does Paul think he is pitting the gospel’s truth against love. To recognize the peerless worth of the gospel is to make one eager to preserve it, zealous to see it undiluted, and lovingly committed to making it known.<sup>45</sup>

But how does the thought of vengeance desired encourage love? This is a point developed at length on the significant text of Romans 12, an important passage that helps develop the Christian understanding of the curses. John Piper treats this at length in the reprint of his doctoral thesis, and is briefly summarized by Carson.<sup>46</sup> The whole chapter should be read in light of the first two verses, that remind believers to respond to the mercy of God by not following the pattern of the world, but doing and approving the will of God. This will mean a readiness to serve, and especially love that is sincere (12:9). But that includes the warning to “hate what is evil”, not as a contrary point, but a complementary one – love that is sincere will necessarily hate what is evil and cling to the good. The instructions concerning joy in hope, and patience in affliction (12:12) introduces that important element of eschatological perspective: as Carson puts it, “Christians do not restrict their moral horizons to immediate results; they make their ethical decisions from an eternal perspective”.<sup>47</sup>

Therefore we are to bless, and not curse, nor are we to repay evil for evil. But it is not because vengeance is wrong: it is because vengeance is the Lord’s. What impresses about this text is that there is place for both love and hate, for both blessing and wrath. Paul uses the Old Testament to make his case: avenge not yourselves; leave wrath to God – because God has said that “I will repay”; so if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if thirsty, give him drink: because this heaps coals on his head. Both Piper and Carson argue that this latter expression does not mean good actions will bring shame to the evil person, but that good actions that are paid back with evil still bring coals of judgment on the head of the unrepentant one.

So the reason we can act the way Paul stipulates towards unbelievers who take up the role of enemies is because we are sure that God will deal with them appropriately. For now, we pray for their conversion: unambiguously, we show them love, pray for them, and seek to bear testimony of Christ to them – all the while knowing that if they maintain the stance of enemy they must ultimately answer to God. Piper summarizes the connection this way:

The fulfilment of the command of enemy love hangs on the surety of the Christian’s hope....God’s action on the day of salvation in which the Christian hopes will involve the revelation of this wrath (Romans 2:6-8). The

---

<sup>44</sup>Wilcock, p.122f.

<sup>45</sup>Carson, *Love in Hard Places*, p.168.

<sup>46</sup>Carson, *ibid.*, pp.49-51; Piper, *Love Your Enemies*, 2012 reprint, pp.111-119.

<sup>47</sup>Carson, *ibid.*, p.51.

argumentation of Romans 12:19-20 suggests that the Christian can love his enemy only if he is sure that the future will bring wrath upon those enemies whom he loves. Why?

If God *never* brings vengeance on those who persist in disobeying the truth, or destruction on the enemies of the cross (Phil.3:18f), but rather continues to grant his people suffering (Phil.1:29) while his enemies prosper and are blessed (Rom 12:14), then he is an unfaithful God whose covenant is worthless. For he would be saying in effect that it is a matter of complete indifference whether one trusts in him or not....If this were true, the hope of the gospel which hangs on God's' faithfulness, would be shattered. And if the hope of the gospel is shattered, then the ground of enemy love, indeed of all Christian ethics, is lost. Therefore, there is a very real sense in which the Christian's love of his enemy is grounded in his certainty that God will take vengeance on those who *persist* in the state of enmity toward God's people.<sup>48</sup>

Of course, these texts must be handled carefully, because as Carson and Piper both point out, they were misunderstood to allow for hating one's enemies if they were not "neighbours": Jesus is certainly clarifying how they must be handled. But if the knowledge of God's certain justice is necessary to enable us to love our enemies, then these texts can encourage just that.

Romans 12, therefore, reflects what our observations of these Psalms demonstrated: the proper response to affliction is to leave wrath to be worked out as God intends, while we continue to do what is good.<sup>49</sup> The pain felt is fully acknowledged as real, and the response to it is not a "mushy sentimentalism"<sup>50</sup>. But we do, longingly, want to see the world without such evil and injustice, and the only way that can possibly happen is if evil is wiped out – by wiping out all those who persist in perpetrating it.

Fourthly, the Psalms of imprecation also serve to challenge our commitments, and urge us to realize that there are some either/or matters to address. Paul underlines this in 1 Corinthians 10:21. This is the point in Psalm 139:19-21, that we observed earlier. Motyer points out that "some situation of moral conflict, evil in its most culpable and outrageous forms, made David not only take sides (19-24) but also re-explore his shelter and security in God".<sup>51</sup> David must take sides, and he sides with the Lord: which explains why the hatred of verses 19-22 gives way to the cry for examination in verses 23-24: it is his unwavering desire to please the Lord. Motyer continues,

To say that the cry for judgment is astray from the Jesus of Luke 23:34 is to forget the Jesus of Mt. 7:23; 25:41, 46a; Rev.6:15ff – the biblical dimension of the wrath of God. Maybe if we matched the spirituality of vs 1-18 we would be in a position to judge the morality of 19-24. Indeed if we shared his commitment to moral emotions (21) and his unreserved commitment (23-24) we would find no other words possible. If these words shock, the fault is more likely in us....To side with God is to identify with the totality of his revealed character and ways.<sup>52</sup>

Once again, these Psalms are of value in the overall pastoral goal of making clear what it means to belong to God; to partake of the Lord's Table, and declare that Christ is all. This is James Adams' key application, and the reason he entitled the book *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*. He warns the church of failing in its God-given commission if it ignores the call to arms that these texts embrace – again, given his view that the "I" of the Psalms is Christ, it is His call to arms against evil, and we are called to side with Him. He exhorts us that "it is time to announce the war cries from the Psalms clearly and forcefully. Only then will the church of Jesus Christ awake from lethargy and rise once again to battle. A lack of urgency in the soldiers and confusion in the ranks should not surprise us if we have failed to pass on the battle cry." Later, he returns to this point and declares that "the Christian church has lost its military vision because the pulpit

---

<sup>48</sup>Piper, *Love Your Enemies*, pp.117-118.

<sup>49</sup>See 1 Peter 4:12-19 and the instructions there for unjust suffering.

<sup>50</sup>Carson's phrase,

<sup>51</sup>Motyer, p.578.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p.579.



has been ashamed of the battle cries from the Psalms”.<sup>53</sup>

Even without accepting Adams’ view, as discussed above, there is no doubt that battle lines are being drawn, and at least in some of the Psalms, notably 139, we are being called to declare ourselves regarding God’s enemies.

Finally, the Psalms of imprecation point us to the reality of the victory of Jesus Christ in the cross and resurrection. The Psalmist is crying out in the anguish of oppression and injustice for there to be an answer from God, and intervention that will make it right, that will establish righteousness. He knows that this will demand righteousness from him as well, and he is ready to face that. But this world is badly broken, and rebel humans are a far cry from the just and holy God who made them, and for whose glory they were created.

In some senses, we still feel the longing conveyed by the white-hot passion with which these Psalms come to us, as Kidner puts it.<sup>54</sup> This is why 2 Thessalonians uses such similar language, and Revelation shares the cry, “How long?”, waiting for that vindication that proves that faith in Christ was and is the right choice.

But this also indicates the way in which the history of redemption has moved on, for what we know is that the Lord *has* come down; and while there are still huge tracts of “not yet”, there is an emphatic “already” that sees the enemies of God on the run. Again, Adams urges us to recognize “How important it is to warn people of the implications of these prayers! We will fail as messengers if we preach the Psalms of David only as high points of a devotional diary. We must lift up Christ and show the glorious truth that He is *central* in the Psalms”.<sup>55</sup>

To this end, we hear the cry for God to arise and scatter His enemies in Psalm 68:1, and the call for the wicked to perish before God; we hear the description of the earth shaking before the God of Sinai, kings and armies fleeing from before Him. We watch with the Psalmist as the Lord comes to His sanctuary, ascending on high with captives in His train; we hear that God will wound, will crush, the head of his enemies – that old promise from Genesis 3 finding fulfilment.

And we are one with that Psalmist – except we have Paul speaking in the past tense: He has ascended higher than the heavens to fill the whole universe (Ephesians 4:7-11), pouring out the spoils of victory upon His church. He has been exalted far above all principality and power, and every hostile force that ever arrayed itself against God has been left in the dust. The battle goes on, but we stand, strong in the Lord, and in His mighty power, standing in the evil day (Ephesians 6:10-13), and it is all because of the mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated Him in the heavenlies.

This declaration is the echo of yet another Psalm, 110:1, that promises that His enemies will be made His footstool; here is the answer to the plaintive cry for justice in the Psalms. The pastoral implications of this in our preaching are huge: O’Brien writes on Ephesians 1:20-23 that “the power with which God works in the lives of believers is the same might by which he raised Christ from death to share his throne”, and again, “With Christ’s exaltation to heaven the centre of reference has shifted from earth to heaven, where he now is (cf. 6:9). His presence there is determinative for believers’ ongoing existence (cf. Eph.2:5-6; Col.3:1-4).”<sup>56</sup> Mostly, Ephesians deals with the “realized eschatology” of what God has already achieved in Christ, but there is still the futurist eschatology in view: “In spite of their defeat the world-rulers of this darkness (Eph.6:12) exercise considerable control over individuals and nations in the present. But in the coming age their control will be a thing of the past. Paul thus goes out of his way to show his readers that they need not fear the future.”<sup>57</sup>

He concludes his treatment of Ephesians 1 summarizing Paul’s message for these believers: “Let these predominantly Gentile Christians in Asia Minor, probably living under the pressures of the surrounding syncretistic environment with its

---

<sup>53</sup> Adams, *War Psalms*, pp. 67-68, 77

<sup>54</sup> Kidner, p.461.

<sup>55</sup> Adams, *War Psalms*, p.74.

<sup>56</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, 1999, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, p.141.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.143.

truth claims and pagan lifestyle, take heart from what God has graciously and powerfully done in his Son on their behalf.”<sup>58</sup>

The believer is struck also by the curse that fell on us all because of our rebellion. It echoes through Scripture from its beginning in Genesis 3, through its various displays in the Flood and other judgments that fall on many nations. We discover that we are ourselves under a curse, and enemies of God! But we stand in stunned amazement to read in Galatians 3:13 that "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us". As these curses remind us of the sinfulness of the very sin that we ourselves must own, they bring into sharp focus the astonishing grace and power of the cross, that those who once were destined for that very destruction find themselves richly and eternally blessed.

This, then is the reason why we must preach these Psalms, albeit with care and contextual sensitivity: we live in just such a world that is hostile to God, and need to know that He not only cares about it, but has matters well in hand. We can follow His instructions, even the difficult ones like loving enemies, because there is no possibility of their unseating Christ. When we hear of the sufferings of fellow-believers in countries where oppression runs rampant, we will pray for them; we will pray with them that the salvation of their enemies would be the means of plundering Satan’s kingdom: and yet we will long for these opposing voices to be stopped and their influence blunted. The resulting picture of the Christian faith is fuller, and more realistic and fitting, for those dwelling in this “present evil age”; for the fact remains that Christ gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from it (Galatians 1:4) — and this all according to the will of God our Father, to whom alone is glory forever.

---

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., p.152.

### ***Selected Annotated Bibliography:***

In my studies on the Psalms, I followed three commentaries; I would have loved to have compared them with Spurgeon's extensive comments, and other references I have, but simply could not. Only references specifically on these Psalms are included here.

Kidner, Derek,

*I enjoyed this treatment very much. Kidner has a section in his Introduction on these Psalms that is decently balanced and helpful. He is capable of saying much in a compressed space, which I found to be a virtue. Of the three commentaries mentioned here, his is probably the "middle" one in terms of accepting these Psalms as legitimate for Christians; he sees them as "coming to us white-hot", and would see, for example, Romans 2:4-5 as making similar points in a more cool-headed way; but the themes are legitimate.*

Motyer, Alec, in *New Bible Commentary, 21<sup>st</sup> Century (4<sup>th</sup>) Edition*, ed. G.J. Wenham; J. A. Motyer; D.A. Carson and R.T. France, IVP, Downers' Grove, Ill., 1994.

*This was my favourite of the three for its balanced view of these Psalms, even a little more generous than Kidner in recognizing why they are there, and explaining their place; of course, he does recognize the difference with the NT, and warns against unjust anger. Being a one-volume commentary, one often wishes for more detail, but like Kidner, he has a remarkable ability to cover the ground in very brief space. He mentions them in introductory remarks, but it is necessary to read on each of the Psalms in question to gain a full perspective of his views. Motyer also wrote the article on Psalms in the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (1970), which I have in my library, but did not compare.*

Wilcock, Michael,

*All three commentators come at these Psalms from the same basic viewpoint, but Wilcock would be the one most inclined to be critical of the attitudes expressed – although he, too, affirms that it is not personal vindictiveness. His last comments on Psalm 35 are where his fullest treatment is found. He is more wordy, and as befits the intentions of the Bible Speaks Today series, writes in a more narrative way.*

In addition to these three commentaries, there are brief but significant notes on these Psalms found in...

Carson, D.A., *Love in Hard Places*, Crossway, Wheaton, Ill., 2002.

Kline, Meredith, *The Structure of Biblical Authority*, Revised edition, Eerdmans, 1975.

*The chapter, "The Intrusion and the Decalogue", includes a few comments on these Psalms; as noted in the paper, useful to point to the eschatological thrust of the curses.*

Lewis, C.S., *Reflections on the Psalms*, Harvest, 1958.

*One chapter is devoted to "The Cursings". As noted in the paper, Lewis is quite disturbed by the language, and does not fear calling them contemptible and devilish, but realizes they are part of Scripture, and lessons need to be drawn from them.*

Piper, John, *Love Your Enemies*, Crossway, Wheaton, Ill., 1979, 2012

*This was Piper's doctoral dissertation presented to University of Munich in 1974, published in 1979. The reprint in 2012 has a new preface, in which Piper is very nearly apologetic for the "history of traditions" approach to finding the roots of the command to love your enemies in the exhortation-sections of the epistles. In the preface of 2012, under the heading, "Pastors, don't do it this way", he declares the fruit of this approach to be disproportionately small. But the thrust of the message is that new creatures need new commands, and this command can only really come to the fore with the coming of Christ – and it does. Thus the imprecatory Psalms might be misunderstood if all we had were the OT context, and as the conflicts with Jesus show, his contemporaries had misunderstood them.*

*These Psalms are not the focus, but are mentioned in passing on pages 33-35. The section on Romans 12 (p.111ff) is useful, even though not mentioning Psalms. Carson summarizes the points Piper makes, and thus reading Carson is likely sufficient.*

Thompson, John L., *Reading the Bible With the Dead*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007.

*A Chapter is devoted to "Psalms and Curses". The book provides a "history of exegesis" of a variety of many of the challenging stories of Scripture that works through exegesis from the early church through to the modern era. Obviously brief, he writes in an engaging style, and concludes the chapter with his observations. Time only permitted the reading of the relevant chapter, so I cannot comment on the book as a whole. The author is Professor of Historical Theology, and of Reformed Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena.*

The only book-length treatment I had access to was:

Adams, James E., *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*. P&R, Phillipsburg, NJ, 1991.

*I showed in the paper that I had some trouble with his seeing the “I” of the Psalms as Christ exclusively, but this should not be taken to mean I saw no value in his work. Much of my work was done by the time I received a copy of the book, and that, more than anything, explains the lack of reference to it. His conclusions and suggestions for preaching the Psalms are along the lines of what I had worked out through these other sources. If this is a topic you wish to explore further, do get this book if you can. His approach certainly makes the understanding of them Christ-centred, which is essential.*