

PRAYERS OF PRAISE AND OF IMPRECATION IN THE PSALMS

Christopher K. Lensch

Introduction

The book of Psalms historically has been identified as the hymnbook of the church. As our canon of prayerful hymns, it captures all the emotions of the human soul. From the torment of the persecuted, to the anguish of the penitent, to the quiet confidence of the soul at peace with God, to the ecstasy of the supplicant delivered from himself and his enemies, the Psalms are unsurpassed in defining our approach to God.

Deeply spiritual and emotionally personal, the Psalms set the pattern for our prayers of adoration, confession, and pleading. Is anyone hungering for God? Let him find satisfaction in the words of Psalm 42. Is anyone anxious over the state of his heart or of his world? Let him find peace in Psalm 73. Is anyone troubled? Let him find security in Psalms 77 and 80. Is anyone overflowing with joy? Let him exult in the praise of God in Psalms 111 and 113.

God's gift to us, the Psalms are the highest expressions of man's deepest aspirations after God. They capture our desire to commune with God, to think His thoughts, to do His will. As such, the Psalms are responsive to Who God is.

Once we begin to recognize Who God is, our very normal response to His daily goodness is worship. More than a responsive litany of prayers, however, the Psalms must be seen in our approach to God as constitutive. Enlightened by the teaching of the Law of Moses, they shape our view of God and ourselves, leading us accordingly to Him as our Creator and our Redeemer. The Psalms elucidate for us the theological world in which we interact with God.

Prayers of Praise

While the Psalms are quite personal at times, they are very much God-centered. The clear and deliberate picture of God in the Psalms dictates our approach to Him. Creatures though we are, God made us to fellowship with Him; we are made in the image of God.¹ Still, His infinity/eternality,² righteousness,³ undeserved goodness,⁴ and holiness⁵ remind us that we may approach only at His bidding and on His terms.⁶

But worship Him we must. Here is how one contemporary Bible student beautifully describes the bridge of praise between God and His worshipers:

Praise is the duty and delight, the ultimate vocation of the human community; indeed, of all creation. Yes, all of life is aimed toward God and finally exists for the sake of God. Praise articulates and embodies our capacity to yield, submit, and abandon ourselves in trust and gratitude to the One whose we are. Praise is not only a human requirement and a human

need, it is also a human delight. We have a resilient hunger to move beyond self, to return our energy and worth to the One from whom it has been granted. In our return to that One, we find our deepest joy. That is what it means to “glorify God and enjoy God forever.”

As praise is appropriate to human community, so praise is appropriate to the character of God, for our praise is a response to God’s power and mercy. Nothing more can be said to God. Nothing more can be added to God. Nonetheless God must be addressed. It is appropriate to address God in need, by way of petition and intercession. But address in need occurs in a context of lyrical submission in which God is addressed not because we have need, but simply because God is God and we are summoned to turn our lives in answer to God.⁷

True praise will be responsive to what God has done in His world. Biblical praise will be a constitutive, rational approach to Who God is. The Father’s praise will be in spirit and in truth.

This is why the praise of God requires more than our noise, or at our worst, our silent groanings. Praise is more than a feeling within us. God has revealed Himself in the Psalms in such a way that the Psalmist always worships the Lord intentionally and rationally. Where do any of the Psalms allow us to put our minds in neutral to blather away in the presence of the Almighty? The Lord was never pleased with the fat of rams if the worshiper’s heart was not in the sacrifice. Neither is He pleased with twenty empty “Hail Marys,” nor with a 100 thoughtless repetitions of a “praise chorus” to the point of charismatic hyper-ventilation, nor with the pagan’s spinning prayer wheel, nor with our trite table prayers.

Rather, praise must focus on its grand Object so that there generally will be a deliberate, rational aspect to praise besides the emotive aspect. There will be a balance between the groanings of Romans 8:26⁸ and the diverse and loud “hallelujahs” of Psalm 150. The apostle summarizes, “What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding.”⁹

The Psalms teach us that God’s praise must be both cognitive and emotive, from the heart and the mind. It is fitting that our focused prayers of praise should be carried by the emotive vehicle of music.

Prayers of Imprecation

There are some prayers in the Psalms against the wicked that immature or misguided Christians might wish were less focused and more implicit. They are troubled by prayers in the Psalms that utter harsh sentiments against God’s enemies. These are generally called imprecations, or imprecatory prayers in the Psalms. There are as many as 50 imprecations scattered among at least eighteen of the Psalms.¹⁰

Modern Christians have mistakenly made “dispensational” value judgments about these OT prayers calling for judgment. No less than C. S. Lewis was misguided in his handling of

these prayers. He writes¹¹ that the language of imprecation in the Psalms breathes of “refined malice” and borders on being “devilish,” and that Christians may not entertain similar passions nor pray similar prayers seeking judgment.

While not justifying the language of imprecation, Lewis probes for an explanation and short-sightedly concludes that it was a cultural problem.

...[H]e explains that the ancient Hebrew people had no social pressures to refrain from expressing their feelings, such as resentment, with anything less than perfect freedom — ‘without disguise, without self-consciousness, without shame’ — without fear of being politically incorrect, sounding neurotic, or being sued for saying something that might offend the hearer. He notes as well that the psalmists lived in much more bloody and violent times. War was much more ‘up close and personal.’ Modern warfare, in many ways, is much more impersonal and often fought from a great distance. [Many of us] have never experienced the brutalities of war — of seeing friends and loved-ones brutally tortured, beaten, bludgeoned, axed, or stabbed with all the bloody gore and awful smelliness of it. The very brutality of the language of these Psalms repulses our effete modern sensibilities. ...Lewis admits of our genteel softness as a reason for seeing these passionate calls for revenge as horrific.¹²

Dispensational offenders¹³ like this impugn the relevancy, if not the plenary inspiration, of the Word of God. Where Lewis missed the boat is his failure to recognize that the call for curses was not against personal enemies, but against God’s sworn enemies. This is not a case of personal passions getting the best of a believer, but of seeking God’s glory through the execution of God’s justice upon His enemies.

When the enemies of God’s anointed king blasphemed and worked violence, David as God’s representative could legitimately say, “Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.”¹⁴

Before dismissing portions of God’s Word as sub-biblical, casual critics need to consider how imprecations in the Psalms fit, not just into their OT times, but into the context of the Psalm and into the message of the whole Bible. Consider these factors:¹⁵

There is no conflict between the ethic of the OT and NT. Jesus’ teaching in the “Sermon on the Mount” about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile addresses the believer’s behavior and attitude toward unjust, personal adversaries. In that sermon He teaches that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill (“establish”) it.¹⁶ This becomes even clearer when we view Jesus’ sermon as a conservative reconfirmation of the OT ethic of loving one’s personal enemies.¹⁷

Jesus never set aside the OT law of retribution (*lex talionis*) against social criminals who, as enemies of God and His magistrate, must be prosecuted. Such social or international criminals are in view in the Psalms as objects of the Psalmist’s execrations.

To impugn the imprecations of the OT is to impugn Jesus and the apostles.

Of keen interest is Jesus' familiarity and usage of imprecatory Psalms. Apart from four key Messianic Psalms, Jesus and the apostles cite most often certain imprecatory Psalms. Psalm 69 is referenced five times and seems to have found a place in His heart during his ministry.

Jesus not only pronounces a woe (a curse) upon Chorazin and Bethsaida, but He consigns Capernaum to Hades for its hard-heartedness.¹⁸ Jesus is not above saying that some souls are "accursed."¹⁹

Paul calls for a curse upon anyone who does not love Jesus²⁰ or who preached a false gospel.²¹ He calls for justice against his and God's enemies, knowing that vengeance belongs to the Lord and that He will repay.²²

John carries the message of the martyrs calling from the grave for retribution.²³

Christians should know that divine grace is supported by divine justice, and divine justice prepares for divine grace. With a biblical view of God and God's justice, and with the realization that any poetic vitriol in the Psalms is directed against the Lord's enemies, prayers of imprecation in the Psalms not only become understandable, but expected. Even C. S. Lewis says that the absence of righteous indignation in our own lives should alarm us.²⁴

If nothing else is considered apart from Jesus' usage of the imprecatory Psalms, we must draw the conclusion of another careful Bible student:

I do not say that the fact that these Psalms are so unequivocally endorsed and appropriated by our blessed Lord explains the difficulty they involve. But I am sure that the simple statement of it will constrain the disciples of Christ to touch them with a reverent hand, and rather to distrust their own judgment concerning them than to brand such Scriptures as the products of an unsanctified and unchristian temper.²⁵

While Christians should not rush to sling wholesale imprecations against God's present day enemies, neither should we be troubled when in our responsive Scripture readings in worship we come across prayers invoking God's judgment.

Conclusion

Right praying grows out of right theology. When we pray for justice for ourselves or for just retribution on anti-Christian forces, we pray according to God's will knowing that justice belongs to Him and that He will repay. When we adore God in our prayers of praise, we meet Him in the heavenlies and begin "to enjoy Him forever."

The Psalms teach us that prayer indeed belongs to the realm of the Spirit. The Psalms teach us that prayer is informed and shaped by God's objective Word and by an enlightened desire to seek His kingdom and His righteousness. And if the Psalms teach us nothing else, they

remind us that we can pour out our souls to God in prayer, in song, and, indeed, in prayer-songs known as the Psalms.

¹ “For You have made him a little lower than the angels, And You have crowned him with glory and honor. 6 You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet....” –Ps. 8:5ff.

² “Before the mountains were brought forth, Or ever You had formed the earth and the world, Even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God.” – Ps. 90:2; cf. Ps. 139.

³ “For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, Nor shall evil dwell with You. Lead me, O LORD, in Your righteousness because of my enemies; Make Your way straight before my face.” –Ps. 5:4, 8.

⁴ “Show Your marvelous lovingkindness by Your right hand, O You who save those who trust in You From those who rise up against them.” – Ps. 17:7; cf. Ps. 103.

⁵ “Exalt the LORD our God, And worship at His footstool — He is holy.” –Ps. 99:5, 9.

⁶ “Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.” –Ps. 95:6, 7.

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel’s Praise*, p. 1.

⁸ “Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered” –Rom 8:26.

⁹ 1 Cor. 14:15.

¹⁰ For example, see Psalms 35:5, 6, 8; 59:13; 109:8-16; 137.

¹¹ *Reflections on the Psalms*, by C. S. Lewis, pp. 23-25.

¹² Summation of C. S. Lewis by WRS student, Linda Wier, in a Spring 2000 term paper, “Notes on the Imprecatory Psalms,” pp. 4, 5.

¹³ Other dispensational offenders include Halley of Handbook fame and, not surprisingly, C. I. Scofield.

¹⁴ Ps. 139:21, 22.

¹⁵ For a good summary of this question, see *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms*, a recent book by James E. Adams.

¹⁶ Mt. 5:17.

¹⁷ “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” –Lev. 19:18.

¹⁸ Mt. 11:21-24.

¹⁹ Mt. 25:41.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 16:22.

²¹ Gal. 1:8, 9.

²² “Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm. May the Lord repay him according to his works.” –2 Tim. 4:22.

²³ “And they cried with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’” –Rev. 6:10.

²⁴ Lewis, p. 30.

²⁵ Chalmers Martin, “Imprecations in the Psalms” reprinted in *Classical Evangelical Essays*, p. 132.