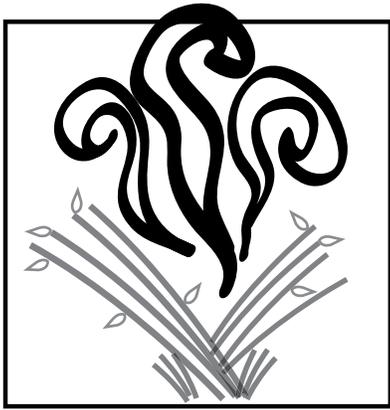


SHALL CHRISTIANS PRAY THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS?

Matthew D. Musteric



What is the place of the imprecatory Psalms in Christian prayer? They are uncomfortable to pray—until you need them. They use language that shocks—until those words express exactly what you are feeling. How do the imprecatory Psalms fit within a tradition that also strives to obey Jesus’ commands to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44)? Aren’t these commands of Jesus directly opposed to the language of the imprecatory Psalms?

There is no dodging the desire for vengeance and retribution in these texts. Consider some of the stronger verses to appear in the Psalter.

O God, break the teeth in their mouths;
tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord!
Let them vanish like water that runs away;
like grass let them be trodden down and wither.
Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime;
like the untimely birth that never sees the sun.
Sooner than your pots can feel the heat of thorns,
whether green or ablaze, may He sweep them away!
The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done;
they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.
People will say, “Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God Who judges on earth.”
—Psalm 58:6–11

Let their table be a trap for them,
a snare for their allies.
Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
and make their loins tremble continually.
Pour out Your indignation upon them,
and let Your burning anger overtake them.
May their camp be a desolation;
let no one live in their tents.
For they persecute those whom You have struck down,
and those whom You have wounded, they attack still
more.
Add guilt to their guilt;
may they have no acquittal from You.

Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;
let them not be enrolled among the righteous.
—Psalm 69:22–28

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!
—Psalm 137:8–9

Faced with such texts as canonical Scriptures, Christians must wrestle with two important questions. First, *should* Christians pray the imprecatory Psalms? If so, then second, *how* should Christians pray them in light of the incarnation of Jesus?

The imprecatory Psalms have been awkward for use in polite society, I imagine, since they were first prayed and then written and offered in the community of Israel. The language is *coarse*. Calling down judgment upon one’s enemies seems *presumptuous*. And inviting God to act so squarely on our behalf can border on *idolatry*. All of these criticisms are true, but only until you actually *need* the imprecatory Psalms.

The journey of most Christians toward praying the imprecatory Psalms, I am confident, happens in deeply personal ways: a friend is raped, a family member is murdered, a child is abused. These Psalms are discovered when we ourselves are on the raw end of injustice or cruelty or despair. And in those moments what we most need is language for our pain, rage, horror, and sorrow, and what we cry out for is justice for those who have been wronged. In particular, we need a language *for prayer* that does not trivialize or minimize the evil that has happened but offers it in its most visceral form to God, asking God to intervene—quickly and eternally.

It may even be that praying the imprecatory Psalms would, over time, enable us to craft better prayers of intercession. All too often our prayers in worship are merely attempts to get us to own up to our sins or act better. Prayer in its deepest form, though, is an acknowledgment of our

limitations and a plea for God's intervention in a world spinning out of control.

On an existential level, then, praying these Psalms is a very *human* thing to do. But is it a *Christian* thing to do?

Christians do indeed have explicit reasons for the imprecatory Psalms precisely because these Psalms—perhaps counterintuitively—draw us to Jesus: to his incarnation, death, and resurrection.

The imprecatory Psalms point to the incarnation. Perhaps they do so with words that make us squirm, but the imprecatory Psalms declare that there is no instance of pain or suffering that is out of bounds for prayer. Jesus weeps tears of grief for Lazarus. Jesus wrestles with unplanned disasters (the tower of Siloam) and political overreach resulting in death (the people whose blood Pilate mingled with their sacrifices). Christians pray the imprecatory Psalms as a theological statement that, because of the incarnation, God knows the depths of human pain and suffering *from the inside*.

Let us also remember that the Psalms were the daily prayer book of Jesus. It is the Old Testament book quoted most often by Jesus. While the two Psalms Jesus prayed as he died on the cross—22 and 31—are not themselves imprecatory Psalms, it takes little imagination to consider Jesus praying the entire Psalter as part of his formation in the faith of Israel. Consider how Jesus' own life is a fulfillment of Psalm 35:19 (“Let not those rejoice over me who are wrongfully my foes, and let not those wink the eye who hate me without cause”) and 69:4 (“More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause; mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me with lies. What I did not steal must I now restore?”), as echoed in John 15:25, ““They hated me without a cause.””¹ Jesus' life culminated in a betrayal by a friend, an unjust trial, and undeserved persecution. Jesus not

only prayed the imprecatory Psalms, he *lived* them.

The imprecatory Psalms point to the cross. Our Lord Jesus has suffered the most brutal of deaths on the cross and knows in his own flesh the deepest joys and sorrows of what it means to be human, as well as to suffer at the hands of other human beings. The passion narratives are far from sanitized, describing as they do in brutal detail the suffering and death of Jesus. Reading the imprecatory Psalms next to the Passion narratives in the Gospels invites a difficult question: should our prayer language *ever* be more sanitized than the account of our Lord's death?

It is precisely on the cross that we see the fullness of God's love for us. It is on the cross that we see God on our side. In a similar way, the imprecatory Psalms invite us to see God as the one Who is on our side, God Who is ultimately *for us*. As we confess in the Creed, “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.” God the Father is the just judge of sin. God the Son stands by our side on the cross. God the Holy Spirit is our Advocate and Comforter.

Job, even in his worst suffering, testified to this truth of God on our side. One of the passages often read at graveside committal services confesses:

For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last He will stand
upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus
destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
Whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not
another.
My heart faints within me!
—Job 19:25–27

The imprecatory Psalms draw us to the empty tomb. The imprecatory Psalms ask God to move, to act, to *do something definitive* about the reign of death and evil in our world.

God has definitively acted in raising Jesus Christ from the dead. The bowels of death have been forever ripped apart because Jesus has descended into hell and broken its power. The resurrection of Jesus declares that God has acted and that God will *continue* to act forcefully in the face of evil and death, to break their power over us. In this way, the imprecatory Psalms invite us to pray boldly in the power of the resurrection.

Christians should, in good faith, pray the imprecatory Psalms as needed, because every act of praying them is a gathering at the cross, an act of preparing the burial spices, and an announcement of the resurrection of Christ, the triumph over death, and the victory of God in the flesh—however much our present circumstances resemble a cold and empty tomb.

But—doesn't Jesus call us to love our enemies? Of course. Yet is it right to assume that loving our enemies and praying the imprecatory Psalms are mutually exclusive? The specific words of Jesus are: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who persecute or abuse you (Matthew 5:44, Luke 6:27–28).

There are certainly imprecatory Psalms that call for the destruction of one's enemies, but others call for the evil they have committed to be turned back on them. One could read these verses as a bad form of Christian karma, but the language is centered on God: these verses simply invite God to make the evil (and evildoers) stop what they are doing, which itself is an act of love.

We often sanitize the notion of enemies, forgetting that a true enemy and persecutor is one who genuinely and intently wishes us harm or has already caused destruction of some kind or another to fall upon us. Perhaps praying these Psalms *as an act of love* will bring to mind our own estrangement from God (Romans 5:10). After all, while *we* were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of Jesus.

How might we hold together Jesus' words and the imprecatory Psalms? Praying the imprecatory Psalms against our enemies might be followed by a prayer that visualizes making the sign of the cross on the forehead of our enemy. It is under that cross that we are united with our own enemies as fellow-enemies of the Lord—and objects of God's love and redemption.

The words of Jesus do not forbid praying the imprecatory Psalms. Rather, they guide *how* we pray these Psalms, namely with great humility and not in the spirit of personal vengeance. In fact, praying the imprecatory Psalms can be an act of deep Christian love, insofar as they allow us to release the burden of revenge to the Lord and not take blood vengeance into our own hands.

In this respect, the imprecatory Psalms serve functionally in the same way that the cities of refuge do in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The cities of refuge were established essentially as safe havens for those who had

killed unintentionally. They created a holy pause that put time and space between the act of killing and retribution for that killing. They are the Old Testament form of anger management.

Because we are sinful, we are often tempted to go beyond “an eye for an eye” (Leviticus 24:20), especially when we have been personally wronged. The cities of refuge were established so that our communal blood vengeance did not spiral out of control. They are a check on our penchant for instant vengeance.

The imprecatory Psalms thus stand as a “city of refuge” prayer form in the Bible. They invite us to name our enemies and the pain they have inflicted upon us in the clearest possible way. But they also invite us to bring our blood vengeance and desire for revenge to God. For this reason, and again counterintuitively, they might be considered the most nonviolent prayers in the Bible.

So to the question “Shall Christians

pray the imprecatory Psalms?” the answer is “Yes!” These Psalms invite us into a way of praying that takes seriously the sin and evil in the world. The commands of Jesus shape our praying of the imprecatory Psalms in ways that avoid personal vendettas. And the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus invite us to pray the imprecatory Psalms boldly until our Lord comes again in glory, confident that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). LF

MATTHEW D. MUSTERIC is Pastor at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Pemberville, Ohio.

Note

1. See <blog.biblia.com/2014/04/which-old-testament-book-did-jesus-quote-most/> (accessed January 15, 2016).



WNALC Annual Gathering

August 9

Wyndham Anaheim
Garden Grove Hotel

Anaheim, California

Carl E. Braaten and Robert D. Benne

Lectures in Theology

*“Who is Jesus?” Lectures on
The Person of Christ*

August 9-10

Speakers to be announced.



North American Lutheran Church

Mission Festival and Convocation

“Holy God, Holy Lives”

August 10-12

Register now at www.thenalc.org!