

Imprecatory Psalms: What Do We Do with These Cursing Prayers?

Psalm 69

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Today we want to look at what are called “Imprecatory Psalms”. Imprecatory is a big word which basically means “Cursing.” These are Psalms that contain prayers asking God to bring judgement and punishment one’s enemies, who the Psalmists usually also declare are God’s enemies. So, I’ve entitled this sermon, “What do we do with the cursing Psalms?” Or in short form, “#\$@! Psalms??”

I wonder as you listened to Psalm 69 being read a few minutes ago what emotions did you sense in the words? Yes, the first part of the psalm was full of lament, sorrow, maybe shame, hurt, and then in the parts where the cursing started there was lots of anger and indignation.

We said that the psalms carry prayers and songs sung from the whole spectrum of emotion. Today we see that anger and indignation and rage are not excluded. There is no emotion that is inappropriate to bring to God in prayer. The key we find in the Psalms is that these are all directed to God. I wonder when was the last time you felt boiling anger or rage. Did this find a place in your prayers? I had a spiritual director on a retreat once suggest that I go down to the water and throw rocks in the sea as I prayed out my anger and frustrations. This very physical act of bringing my anger to God was deeply cathartic. But, I too easily forget this as I suspect many of us do. Anger is more easily turned in on ourselves or against those around us rather than released to God in prayer. The Psalmists teach us that the first place to turn in our anger is to God.

“Such words in the biblical text indicate to us that God does not ask us to suppress those emotions but rather to speak about them in pain and heartfelt terms. In speaking out, we give voice to the pain, the feelings of helplessness, and the burning anger.¹”

However...

It’s one thing authentically pray your rage and anger to God, but quite another to pray these kinds of imprecatory or cursing prayers that we see here in Psalm 69, though, don’t you think?

These statements that we find here in Psalm 69 such as:

>May their backs be bent forever. May they be blotted out of the book of life. Pour out your wrath on them.

¹ Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford. “The Theology of the Imprecatory Psalms” in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms* (2011, Fortress Press, Minneapolis), p. 86

And even harsher prayers in other psalms such as:

>May burning coals fall on them. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes. May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children.

Yikes! These are deeply unsettling.

Why are we uncomfortable with these imprecatory psalms? For a few reasons I think. For one thing we don't know how to reconcile them with the teachings of Jesus. How do we reconcile the curses we just read with Jesus' teaching, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." "Turn the other cheek." Is there a place for these imprecatory Psalms then for followers of Jesus? Is there a place for them in our prayers? How about in worship?

Maybe we are also uncomfortable with them because we know deep down that what we pray also shapes us. These days there's a lot being studied and written about the effects of gratitude on our lives. Prayers of gratitude, shape us and make us more grateful, more content. Let's face it, it's not a far leap from praying prayers of retribution to seeing ourselves as agents of retribution. We talk often about participating in God's work, so if we pray in anger for God to inflict violence on our enemies, wouldn't an easy logical step be to then participate in that when we have a chance? To make ourselves God's divine agents of retribution? Unfortunately, this is not just an imaginative exercise as there are plenty of cases past and present where religious folks have violently made this leap.

And maybe a third reason these make us uncomfortable is that we know the futility of eye-for-eye justice that the Psalmists seem to be seeking. If we make one's enemy to suffer as you have, won't their children then want you to suffer in reaction, and then won't your children want them to suffer, and on and on the cycle of violence goes.

There are many reasons for these imprecatory Psalms to unsettle us.

And yet, the people that compiled the psalms and then later the folks that gathered together the writings that we would hold as Scripture, left these in. Why? Are they simply archaic remnants of a harsher O.T. reality that is no longer relevant to N.T. worshippers such as ourselves?

To grapple with what to do with these curses, I think we first have to go deeper in understanding the contexts within which they were first prayed. You see, it is one thing from our comfortable pews (well, sort of comfortable pews) to judge the prayers as extreme, to smugly think that, though we, too, have been angry, we would never go so far as wishing such harsh treatment of those who have hurt us. But these prayers were not first prayed in comfortable pews, by people with full bellies, and national health care. Scholars believe that these Psalms were put together in this form for the community to have as its prayer book during the time when the people were suffering in exile. Even though this particular Psalm 69 is

written from the perspective of a single individual, the community likely found deep resonance in the feelings of the psalmist as they, too, found themselves in the midst of extreme and unjust suffering at the hands of their conquering rulers. They had been stripped of their lands and livelihoods, scattered and separated from their loved ones. Carted off to foreign lands or left destitute to eke out a living on the pillaged lands while being forced to pay homage to the very ones who cause the suffering. We have to imagine such a context if we are to ask if these kinds of prayers are ever justified.

But I think that is still too distant and too easy to leave in the O.T. world. We have to ask if we could ever say nod our heads in understanding or at least compassion to anyone praying such prayers in our world day.

Imagine for a moment, if while we are gathered here, the authorities showed up and forcibly removed all of the school aged children gathered downstairs. What if they were then bussed to a different city and forced to speak another language until they no longer remembered the language you speak in your homes. What if the children were housed in inhuman conditions where some of them may die and many of them would be abused and there was nothing you could do about it?

Then would these prayers be justified then? Would they be understandable? Could we smugly dismiss these prayers as archaic if they were prayed today by someone who had experienced such a gross violence, such injustice. This, of course, is the story of Residential schools in the not too distant past of these territories we acknowledge each week. I could have spoken about so many other contexts around the world and in Canada today where people are suffering unspeakable violence with no recourse. I feel deeply sad that some of you here today may have experienced such injustice and violence.

It's important to understand that these imprecatory psalms are prayers of a people who are powerless, who have suffered unspeakable violence, and who have no recourse for justice. Over and over it seems that the oppressors are just continuing to get away with it and no one sees or hears or will respond. When that happens, to whom do you appeal? What does your appeal sound like?

The raw and extreme language of these psalms are born out of unspeakable anguish. They are the honest expressions in prayer of their deep rage at the injustice and violence inflicted against a people. But we must also hear that underneath the raw and extreme language, ultimately, these are prayers for things to be put right by God.

Fleming Rutledge writes, "Gross injustice demonstrates a basic premise: *in our world, something is terribly wrong and cries out to be put right.*"² These are prayers of a people crying out to God, "For heaven's sake, PUT THINGS RIGHT!!" The psalmists are imploring the only one

² Fleming Rutledge. *The Crucifixion*. (2015, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids) p. 122.

they know who really has the ability to put things right, to stop the injustice, to hold the perpetrators to account.

Another author restates this with an important clarification: “The imprecatory words of the Psalter are cries to God to ‘make things right’ in the face of seemingly hopeless wrong; they are not cries from communities and individuals for permission to carry out their own retributive acts for the wrongs done to them.³” There is a difference. Let’s make sure that we hear that the one called to act here is God.

So, let’s just say that we can enter into a place of empathy rather than judgement for why someone may use such extreme language in prayers, I think we may still be uneasy about such prayers in our Scriptures, because we are uncertain how God responds to such prayers.

So, we need to ask how does God respond to these prayers? Our Psalmist today tells us in verse 33, that “The Lord hears the needy and does not despise his captive people.” And this is a constant theme throughout the Scriptures. The Psalmist can cry out in their hopeless state of deep injustice because they trust that the Lord hears them.

So the assumption is that God hears the cries of the suffering. We still need to ask how does God respond?

To consider this I’d like to go back to this specific Psalm for a bit. You may be surprised to hear that this Psalm is the second most quoted Psalm in the New Testament. You see, from very early on, in the N.T. church this individual at the beginning of the Psalm that is suffering betrayal and scorn, the one who hated without reason, the one who is filled with zeal for God’s house, this one who is given vinegar for thirst, is identified with the suffering Christ, with Jesus at the time of his crucifixion. Even by the time of Paul’s writing of his letters he quotes this psalm in ways that indicate that the early followers of Jesus were reading this Psalm through the lens of Jesus’ suffering. Here is a page from a Psalter⁴ much later but still over a 1000 years ago from us. It is from a Byzantine psalter from 9th Century. It is small - about 5x7. The worn pages show usage. This page is Psalm 69 and you can see that the artist chose to illustrate the psalm with an image of Jesus on the cross being given the vinegar.



³ deClaisse-Walford. p. 89.

⁴ From the CHLUDOV PSALTER

<https://www.ziereisfacsimiles.com/chludov-psalter#&gid=1&pid=4>

How does God respond to these cries of the suffering? He enters directly into the suffering. The cross is God's response to these cries.

Again, Fleming Rutledge puts it this way: "No one could have imagined... that he would ultimately intervene by interposing *himself*. By becoming one of the poor who was deprived of his rights, by dying as one of those robbed of justice, God's Son submitted to the utmost extremity of humiliation, entering into total solidarity with those who are without help. He, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, voluntarily underwent the mockery of the multitudes and, in the time of greatest extremity, he could do nothing to help himself. (Mark 15:31)" ⁵

When we as N.T. people say that God hears the cries of the needy, it is not from a place of detachment but hearing by entering in and experiencing the violence against himself and his people.

So, first God's response to this cry that we find in Psalm 69 and elsewhere is one of deep identification and solidarity with the suffering.

But, this is not enough. The Psalmist isn't crying out simply to be understood. They don't just want God to empathize with them. The plea is to make things right, to end the violence and to bring justice to the perpetrators.

So we have to ask, in this psalm that has been identified with Christ, what is Christ's response is to the curses. If the early church identified Christ in the voice of the psalmist that is abandoned, rejected, and unjustly oppressed, what about the part where the psalmist cries out for the Lord's vengeance, which we have said is such a deeply human response to great violence?

Here, of course, is where the Psalmists response and the response of Jesus diverges. Jesus in response to the violence of the accusers cries out, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Rather than "charge them crime upon crime."

Of course we marvel at this incredible and unexpected, and dare we say unnatural, forgiveness that Jesus offers to *his* enemies. But the demand in these imprecatory psalms is for God to set things right in these situations of grave wrongs. How is the cross an adequate response to such violence?

I have to admit that this stumped me this week. Coming from this perspective of extreme violence and the suffering of the powerless, the prayer seemed inadequate as a response somehow. It felt like a mockery of those who had suffered or at best a puny response of one who really couldn't make things right. How is the cross the response of the all powerful God who really could rectify or make right the situation of violence?

⁵ Rutledge, p. 132.

Then it hit me. If God answered these cursing prayers directly in the way that the one in pain has asked, would it really rectify the situation? Yes, the eye for an eye principle on one level likely helps with the pain since part of the pain of injustice is that the violence is not named as wrong. But ultimately retribution does not fix or make up for or heal the pain of the injustice. If I killed your spouse, you may find a measure of catharsis or even a measure of a sense of justice if you killed mine – at least then I would know what I had done to you – but that wouldn't bring your spouse back, it wouldn't make that pain go away. This is the great lie of violence. In our justifiable anger and rage we come to believe that violence will solve the pain inflicted by violence, but it never does. More violence only gives birth to violence and still leaves us wounded from the violence inflicted on us.

On the cross, Jesus demonstrates through self-giving solidarity that he hears the cries, that he acknowledges the pain, that he identifies with those who have suffered injustice, but he also shatters the myth that inflicting more violence will make it right again. Rather than perpetuating the cycle of violence or even escalating it, Jesus absorbs the violence and breaks the never ending cycle. Jesus responds to the demands of the suffering to “For Heaven’s sake, Make it Right!” not by raining down fire and brimstone but by raining down love. The path to making it right can never be through more violence. It can only be through love. Love is what breaks the cycle of violence. Love is what comforts the suffering. Love is what mends the broken hearted. Love is what guides the repair work as we try to rebuild after the destruction of violence. Love is what exposes the oppression and undoes the oppressors.

But please don't hear this as a soft and wimpy love that is complicit with evil. The love that Jesus demonstrates on the cross is unlike any love that any of us could muster. This is divine love. This love is powerful and bold. This is love that says to oppression and violence, “You shall not pass!” This is love that lifts up the ones who have been ignored and trampled on for generations. This is love that says I see you, I see your pain, I see what was done to you, it is wrong! It must stop, I will heal, I will make right *through my love*.

This is mighty love and it is more powerful than any violence... always.

So back to our original question, what do we do with these cursing Psalms?

1. We recognize in them the invitation to bring to God in prayer all of our emotions and experiences, no matter how raw and painful.
2. Instead of jumping to judgement, we compassionately consider what kinds of contexts in the past and the present would evoke such prayers. As we do so we ask how we can join in solidarity with them in crying out for the suffering to end and for things to be put right by God.
3. Of course, if we do so we will have to face the uncomfortable reality that these very prayers may be directed at us. We have to ask if we are the enemies who are evoking these prayers. Are we the ones who have done the violence or been complicit in the violence? To honestly hear these prayers is to repent and turn from our ways of harm

and by God's grace to work toward reparation and reconciliation. Authentically hearing these prayers is a call to action. But here we must tread very carefully. As Christ followers, the call is to loving action, never to violent retribution.

4. We must listen to these cries in the imprecatory Psalms in the context of the whole of Scripture and especially in light of God's response to violence at the Cross. There we celebrate that Jesus in the most surprising and frankly scandalous way, broke the cycle and curse of violence through self-giving love. We have tasted this love, we are invited into this love, but ultimately the response to the violence is not our own love, but in God's love. This is where we place our hope even when violence seems to rule the day. This is why we can join in with the Psalmist even in the midst of any darkness and sing, "I will praise God's name in song and glorify God with thanksgiving. The poor will see and be glad—you who seek God, may your hearts live! The Lord hears the needy and does not despise the captives." (Psalm 69: 30, 32-33)

AMEN