

Shall We Pray, “Kill My Enemies!”? Bruce Waltke²³

Psalms 3:7 and 5:10 petition God to punish the king’s enemies. The thirty-five psalms that add to the petition motif a plea that God punish the enemy are often incorrectly labeled “imprecatory psalms.” The label is inappropriate for they do not call curses down upon the enemy, but ask for justice that God avenge, not revenge, the wrong done to the psalmist. The striking contrast, however, between David’s petitions to punish his enemies and the absence of such petitions by Christ and his apostles—though they predict judgment upon evildoers—and instead instruct the Church to love and forgive one’s enemies within the canon is a gap, not a blank. By “gap” rhetorical critics mean that the omission is intended and meaningful. By a blank is meant that the omission is not intentional and so meaningless. A gap, especially one of this magnitude, calls for theological reflection. These thirty-five psalms—psalm 137 is the usual textbook example, for it calls “blessed” those who dash against the rocks Babylonian babies—trouble many. Lewis speaks of them as “terrible or (dare we say?) contemptible Psalms.”²⁴ In fact, however, upon reflection they teach sound doctrine (2 Tim 3:16) and are most holy for the following reasons:

- 1) These petitions are by saints (especially the innocently suffering king) who have suffered gross injustices. Few commentators have experienced the agony of utterly unprovoked, naked aggression and gross exploitation.
- 2) They are **righteous and just**, asking for strict retribution (cf. Lev 24:17-22). Here C. S. Lewis is helpful, for he notes such expressions are lacking in pagan literature because Israel had a firmer grasp on right and wrong:²⁵

Thus the absence of anger, especially that sort of anger which we call *indignation*, can, in my opinion, be a most alarming symptom . . . If the Jews [sic!] cursed more bitterly than the Pagans this was, I think, at least in part because they took right and wrong more seriously. For if we look at their railings we find they are usually angry not simply because these things have been done to them but because they are manifestly wrong, are hateful to God as well as to the victim. The thought of the ‘righteous Lord’—who surely must hate such doings as much as they do, who surely therefore must (but how terribly He delays!) “judge” or avenge, is always there, if only in the background.²⁶

- 3) The New Testament upholds the justice of God and the **legitimacy to pray for justice** (Luke 18:6-8; cf. Matt 7:23 with Psalm 6:8; Matt 25:46; 2 Thess 1:6-9). In that connection, the pious trust God, not themselves, to avenge the gross injustices against them (Ps 5:1-3, 7). “The wicked, by contrast, avenge themselves (cf. Ps 8:2; Rom 12:17-21).”

²³ Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 95-96.

²⁴ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 23.

²⁵ Lewis, *Reflections*, 28.

²⁶ Lewis, *Reflections*, 31.

- 4) They are **just**. The psalmist is seeking to be avenged, not seeking for revenge. There have been few men," says Kidner, "more capable of generosity under personal attack than David, as he proved by his attitudes toward Saul and Absalom, to say nothing of Shemei."²⁷
- 5) These prayers are **ethical**, asking God to distinguish between right and wrong (cf. Ps 7:8-9; cf. 2 Tim 4:14-18).
- 6) They are **theocratic**, looking for the establishment of a kingdom of righteousness by the Moral Administrator of Universe (cf. Pss 72, 82). As such they are consistent with the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The earthly king asks no more of the Heavenly King than the latter asked of him (cf. Deut 13:5; 17:7, 12; 19:13, 19; 21:9, 22; 22:22, 24). In Psalm 5 David's enemies stubbornly rebel against God (v. 10).
- 7) They are **theocentric**, aiming to see God praised for manifesting his righteousness and justice in the eyes of all (cf. Pss 5:11-12; 35:27-28; 58:10-11).
- 8) They are **evangelistic**, aiming for conversion of earth by letting all men see that the Lord is Most High over all the earth (Ps 83:17, 18).
- 9) They are "**covenantal**;" a wrong against a saint is seen as a wrong against God (Pss 69:7-9, 22-28; 139:19-22).²⁸
- 10) The prayers are **oriental**, full of figures, especially hyperbole (cf. Jer. 20:14-18).
- 11) They are **political**.²⁹ If we may presume the enemy heard the prayer, he would be publicly exposed as one who opposes the kingdom of God. Moreover, the righteous identify with the psalmist and rally around him (Ps. 142:7; cf. the complaint of Psalm 38:11). Indeed, the enemy and potential evildoer may be instructed and converted through prayer (cf. Pss 51:13; 94:8-11).

Though **theologically sound**, however, these petitions for immediate retribution are **inappropriate in our mouth**, because:

- 1) Ultimate justice occurs in the eschaton (Rev 20:11-15; cf. Isa 61:1-2 with Matt 13:30; 25:46; Luke 4:18-20; John 15:15; 2 Cor 6:2; 2 Thes 1:5-9); it is appropriate to pray for the destruction of the wicked at that time of judgment and the avenging of the righteous (Luke 18:1-8; 2 Tim 4:14; Rev 6:9-10).
- 2) Sin and sinner are now more distinctly differentiated (cf. Eph 6:11-18), allowing the saint both to hate sin and to love the sinner.
- 3) The saint's struggle is against spiritual powers of darkness that he conquers by turning the other cheek and by praying for the forgiveness of enemies through their repentance (Matt 5:39-42, 43-48; 6:14; Luke 6:28, 35; Acts 7:60).

²⁷ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (TOTC; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 26.

²⁸ Chalmers Martin, "The Imprecations in the Psalms," *Princeton Theological Review* 1.4 (1903), 537-553.

²⁹ Gerald T. Sheppard, "'Enemies' and the Politics of Prayer in the Book of Psalms," in *The Bible and the Politic of Exegesis*, edited by David Jobling, Peggy L. Day, Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1991).