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## **The Imprecatory Psalms as Means of Mercy and Wellness**

**Geoffrey R. Boyle**

### **Ministering with Hands Tied behind the Back: A Matter of Pastoral Care under the Cross**

I was a pastor for only a month or so when a member asked if she could tell me about a friend's suffering. She had lost two children in back-to-back, but unrelated incidents. It was not a disease (as if that makes it any easier), but each was sudden and unexpected. Each son was in his twenties and left his family behind. While this poor mother was still mourning for the first, the second was taken just like that—and with him, her strength and hope. She was broken, then angry—at life, at her family, at God. But what did she hear from her pastor? *"This is the result of a sinful world. Do not blame God. He did not have anything to do with it."*

He did not have anything to do with it? What sort of God is that? If he was not there with her sons, why not and where was he? And if she could not be angry with God, where should her anger go? Toward her husband? Against the remaining two sons? Does she take it out at work? Or does she just quit—quit work, quit family, quit church, quit life? With nowhere to vent properly, her rage will consume her. This poor, pious woman chose the last option. Thankfully, her good friend (my member who shared the story with me) knew the gospel. Somehow, she knew that it is okay to be angry with God—he can take it. What could've been a predictable formula for divorce or suicide, ended in neither—at least not yet.

As pastors, we fill an office that demands life-and-death responses. We come armed with words. We do not prescribe medicines—except, of course, the medicine of immortality, the Holy Supper. We do not operate on broken limbs but broken hearts. We cannot free people from their prison cells, but we loosen their chains of despair. We come with words, *divine* words. But what words do you bring to the one angry with God? What comfort do you offer to the one who has God as his enemy? What do you say to the rape victim, the abused, or the family whose child was gunned down in school? There are real enemies out there; we cannot deny that. But where is God?

The Scriptures provide words for just such occasions. They fit us with the missing armor, the comfort that has been deprived to those who need it most. These

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words are the psalms of vengeance, the *imprecatory psalms*. In the midst of a very broken and violent world, they reveal a God who is not absent, but smack-dab in the middle. They give us words to cry out against our enemy—even God himself!—and vent our anger, sadness, fear, and near despair. They offer a remedy against taking violence into our own hands, or letting that violence destroy us from the inside, and they allow us to address God as God—the one *who neither slumbers nor sleeps* (Ps 121:4).

### Divine Ammunition

Now, unlike our hymnal, the Psalter is not exactly ordered by category. While some are grouped together—Royal Psalms (93–100), Psalms of Ascent (120–134), Hallelujah Psalms (146–150)—the Psalter has, so far, resisted any consensus in structural logic. Furthermore, there is no section or subtitle called the Imprecatory Psalms. Therefore, defining the *imprecatory* genre is challenging.<sup>1</sup> For example, should we consider Psalm 149 *imprecatory*—a psalm of praise within the climactic doxology of praise (Pss 146–150)—just because it ends with vengeance?

Let the high praises of God be in their throats  
and two-edged swords in their hands,  
to execute vengeance on the nations  
and punishments on the peoples,  
to bind their kings with chains  
and their nobles with fetters of iron,  
to execute on them the judgment written!

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<sup>1</sup> Hence the chink in the armor of Hermann Gunkel's form-critical categorization of genres: the Psalms do not always fit so neatly into one form or another, and often contain multiple forms in the same psalm. John Wenham (*The Goodness of God* [Downers Grove: IVP, 1974]) notes seven imprecatory psalms: 58, 68, 69, 79, 109, 137, 139. Carl Laney ("A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *BS* [1981]: 35–45) says there are at least nine, adding 7, 35, 59, and 83, but dropping 68 and 79. Jacob L. Goodson ("The Psalms of Vengeance: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Theological Interpretation of the Psalms," *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 13, no. 1 [2014]) says there are twenty-four psalms of vengeance in Christian tradition. Though it may simply be an oversight, it is interesting that he does not list Psalm 109. Raymond Surburg ("The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms," *The Springfielder* 39, no. 3 [1975]: 88–102) says there are at least twenty-eight containing imprecations. And R. M. Benson (*Manual for Intercessory Prayer* [London: J. T. Hayes, 1889]) lists as many as thirty-nine psalms with "comminatory" passages. Erich Zenger (*A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney [Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1994; Louisville: WJK Press, 1996]) looked at seven, though for unique reasons. He took the three that had been entirely omitted from the Roman Catholic Church's Liturgy of the Hours (Pss 58, 83, and 109). Then, of the nineteen psalms that suffered ecclesiastical censorship, dropping individual verses, he chose two: 137 and 139. Finally, he added two more—Psalms 12 and 44—showing how Israel dealt with the violence of earlier traditions.

This is honor for all his godly ones.  
Praise the Lord! (Ps 149:6–9)<sup>2</sup>

Broadly speaking, two factors make an *imprecatory psalm*: (1) the cry to God; and (2) that he take vengeance upon an enemy.<sup>3</sup> How lengthy or predominant the imprecation is not determined. For example, few include Psalm 149 in the list of imprecatory psalms, even though both elements are contained. Similar is Psalm 139, that beautiful meditation on God’s providential care for man. At the end, we find an imprecation (more on that below).

Nevertheless, six psalms singularly capture the spirit of imprecation: 139, 137, 109, and the series 57–59. We will consider the role of the imprecation within the psalm itself, how it affects our interpretation of the psalm, and how the psalm affects our understanding of the imprecation.<sup>4</sup>

### *Psalm 139: Perfect Hatred*

Luther introduces Psalm 139 by calling it “a psalm of thanks that praises God that He has provided for them so wonderfully and still reigns in all of His works, words, and thoughts.”<sup>5</sup> Most of us simply say, “Amen!” It is our go-to for confessing the sanctity of life in the womb: “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb” (139:13). It also clearly confesses God’s foreknowledge of us and *for* us: “Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them” (139:16). The psalm beautifully conveys God’s omnipresence, knowing every bit about us—even more than we know ourselves!

O Lord, you have searched me and known me!  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from afar.  
You search out my path and my lying down  
and are acquainted with all my ways. . . .  
Where shall I go from your Spirit?  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!

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<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the ESV<sup>®</sup> Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

<sup>3</sup> Laney defines imprecation as “an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one’s enemies, or the enemies of God.” Laney, “A Fresh Look,” 35.

<sup>4</sup> Only one of these appears in the Sunday liturgical calendar and is thus included in *LSB* (Ps 139).

<sup>5</sup> *Reading the Psalms with Luther* (St. Louis: CPH, 2007), 330.

If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!  
 If I take the wings of the morning  
 and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
 even there your hand shall lead me,  
 and your right hand shall hold me. (139:1–3, 7–10)

This psalm meditates on God’s knowledge and care for us. It is a prayer of thanks, praise, and ultimately, comfort. But then comes an abrupt halt:

How precious to me are your thoughts, O God!  
 How vast is the sum of them!  
 If I would count them, they are more than the sand.  
 I awake, and I am still with you.  
 Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!  
 O men of blood, depart from me!  
 They speak against you with malicious intent;  
 your enemies take your name in vain.  
 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?  
 And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?  
 I hate them with complete hatred;  
 I count them my enemies.  
 Search me, O God, and know my heart!  
 Try me and know my thoughts!  
 And see if there be any grievous way in me,  
 and lead me in the way everlasting! (139:17–24)

The KJV’s “perfect hatred” is even more an offense to piety. So we take what we want and leave the rest. Even the Roman Liturgy of the Hours omits verses 19–22. Hermann Gunkel noted, “It is a remarkable phenomenon that a man who can sink so ardently into the intimacy of God can suddenly re-emerge with such ferocity when he remembers the wicked.”<sup>6</sup>

But is the shift so remarkable? Are these words so unpalatable as to censor them from the liturgical gathering? Erich Zenger asserts, “Those who strike out verses 19–22 because of an excess of ‘Christian’ zeal must be aware that in doing so they are destroying the whole intention of the psalm, both from the poetic and the theological point of view!”<sup>7</sup> In fact, he calls it “artistic and theological barbarity!”<sup>8</sup> What does this mean?

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<sup>6</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986), 586.

<sup>7</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 32.

First, the psalm begins and ends with a plea for searching and testing (139:1, 23–24). This forms an *inclusio*, which invites us to see an intentional structure to the psalm. Second, the drastic shift in subject, especially in the first thirteen verses, powerfully governs how we hear the psalm. At first, all we hear is “you, you, you” (139:1–5):

You have searched me . . .  
 You know when I sit . . .  
 You discern my thoughts . . .  
 You search out . . .  
 You know it altogether.  
 You hem me in.

Then appears the “I” of the psalmist (139:6–12):

Too wonderful for me . . .  
 I cannot attain it . . .  
 Where shall I go . . .  
 Where shall I flee . . .  
 If I ascend . . .  
 If I make my bed in Sheol . . .  
 If I take . . .  
 If I say . . .

Verse 13 draws the two together: “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb.” The psalm turns to praise God for his union with man, leading us to see the interchange between the I’s and you’s throughout, culminating in verse 18: “I awake, and I am still with you.”

But then enter the wicked. What makes the wicked is their assault on both God and man. The psalmist cries: “O men of blood, depart from me!” (v. 19). With violence in their hearts, the wicked seek to sever man from God: “They speak against you with malicious intent” (v. 20). What follows is the continued, faithful confession of unity between God and man: “Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?” (v. 21). The Lord’s enemies are the psalmist’s enemies because the Lord unites himself with the psalmist. The knowledge of this mystery is what is “too wonderful for me” (v. 6).

Psalm 139 offers no discernible historical situation, not even in the superscription. The enemy is not named, and the only offense listed is their breaking of the second commandment—though, they are *men of blood*. Certainly, these enemies could be any foreign nation set against Israel, whether the Philistines or the oft-cited *Edomites*. But such speculation misses the goal of the psalm: the enemy is

anyone set against the Lord and his name. We find no personal vindictiveness in this psalm, simply a unity of will against the enemy of the Lord's name. Therefore, the psalmist prays, "Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God!" (v. 19).

Finally, note the christological thrust. The unity of God and man, Lord and pray-er, reaches fulfillment in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. He is the proper and primary pray-er of the Psalms as a whole—even those requesting vengeance on the enemies.

### **Psalm 137: Total Annihilation**

Psalm 137 is the psalm of violence *par excellence*. If it appears in hymnals or lectionaries (which it does not in our own), then it tends to appear without the last three verses. The most disturbing of the psalms, at least at first glance, fully captures the prayer of imprecation.

By the waters of Babylon,  
 there we sat down and wept,  
 when we remembered Zion.  
 On the willows there  
 we hung up our lyres.  
 For there our captors  
 required of us songs,  
 and our tormentors, mirth, saying,  
 "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
 How shall we sing the Lord's song  
 in a foreign land?  
 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
 let my right hand forget its skill!  
 Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth,  
 if I do not remember you,  
 if I do not set Jerusalem  
 above my highest joy!  
 Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites  
 the day of Jerusalem,  
 how they said, "Lay it bare, lay it bare,  
 down to its foundations!"  
 O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,  
 blessed shall he be who repays you  
 with what you have done to us!  
 Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones  
 and dashes them against the rock! (137)



Rarely shy of allegory, Origen comments: “the just give up to destruction all their enemies, *which are their vices*, so that they do not spare even the children, that is, the early beginnings and promptings of evil.”<sup>9</sup> St. Ambrose defines these “enemy children” as “all corrupt and filthy thoughts against Christ.”<sup>10</sup> Changing the object of the violence offers one helpful way around the affront to piety—the more abstract, spiritual, and impersonal, the easier.

Another option to lessen the offense is to remove God’s blessing of such a sentiment. That is the move of *The Lutheran Study Bible*: “The term translated ‘blessed’ in 137:8–9 does not invoke God’s blessing on the violence. The Hebrew term describes the glee of the one who brings punishment.”<sup>11</sup> This strips the psalm from Christian prayer, as just an episode in the history of God’s people, and an unfortunate one at that.

The text itself makes clear the context for such violent prophecy: the taunt of Babylon (137:1). Israel truly found Babylon as an enemy, yet also iconic of all enemies (similarly, Edom and Egypt). This psalm, though located “by the waters of Babylon,” gives itself to be prayed in and under the suffering from any Babylon. Whether this song is exilic or prophetic of the exile, the suffering is real, and the prayer is real, and so is the desire that enemy and enemy child be dashed to pieces, never rising again. In this way, both Origen and Ambrose rightly see our vices and unfaithful speech as “the daughter of Babylon doomed to destruction.” Yet, we also recognize a real Babylon. Thankfully, Kretzmann nails it with this one: “Naturally, this psalm finds its application in the Christian Church of all times, for it is equivalent to a prayer that God would deliver us from every evil work and preserve us unto His heavenly kingdom.”<sup>12</sup>

### Psalm 109: Cursing and Not Blessing

Psalm 109 approximates a prayer for biblical karma. It is long and tortuous to the pious. Episcopalians today mark at least half this psalm as “optional.”<sup>13</sup> They are likely not alone in skipping large portions. However, “the real problem,” Patrick

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<sup>9</sup> Origen, “*Against Celsus*” 7.22, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), vol. 4, p. 619.

<sup>10</sup> Ambrose, “*Concerning Repentance*” 2.11.106, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952–1957), 10:358.

<sup>11</sup> *The Lutheran Study Bible* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 879, hereafter TLSB.

<sup>12</sup> Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible—The Old Testament: Volume II—The Poetical and the Prophetical Books* (St. Louis: CPH, 1924), 202.

<sup>13</sup> See Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms* (Chesterton, Ind.: Conciliar Press, 2000), 215.

Henry Reardon notes, “is not with the psalm, but with ourselves.” Sounding a bit like Bonhoeffer, he goes on:

We modern Christians are far too disposed to establish our personal sentiments, our own spontaneous feelings, as the standard for our prayer. Thus, if the words of a particular prayer (in this case, a psalm inspired by the Holy Spirit) express emotions and responses with which we do not ‘feel’ comfortable, we tend to think that we are being insincere in praying it. Contemporary Christians have made a virtual fetish of spontaneity in worship, and sincerity nowadays is measured by pulse rhythm. One would think that our Lord had said: “I have come that you may have sincere and heartfelt emotions, and have them more abundantly.”<sup>14</sup>

I think he is right. This psalm discomfords us.

Appoint a wicked man against him;  
 let an accuser stand at his right hand.  
 When he is tried, let him come forth guilty;  
 let his prayer be counted as sin!  
 May his days be few;  
 may another take his office!  
 May his children be fatherless  
 and his wife a widow!  
 May his children wander about and beg,  
 seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit!  
 May the creditor seize all that he has;  
 may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!  
 Let there be none to extend kindness to him,  
 nor any to pity his fatherless children!  
 May his posterity be cut off;  
 may his name be blotted out in the second generation!  
 May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord,  
 and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out!  
 Let them be before the Lord continually,  
 that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth! (109:6–15)

On account of verse 8, and its citation in Acts 1:20, this psalm came to be known as *Psalmus Ischarioticus*. Luther upholds the tradition of understanding this psalm

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<sup>14</sup> Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 215. For a thorough discussion of the hyper-psychologization of our modern culture, see Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

as Christ's prayer against Judas, and then, more broadly, against every instinct of betrayal.<sup>15</sup>

There is also an interesting reception history to this psalm. It appears that Psalm 109 held a sort of *magical* sense as an incantation against an enemy. As late as the early eighteenth century, we come across the following:

Many believe that this psalm must be prayed without interruption for a whole year and nine days, morning and evening. . . . But if this enchantment is neglected even one time, it is thought that it will not fall upon the head of the enemy, and instead will turn back upon the one who prays it. The enemy must know nothing of the reading of the psalm; in addition, one must not greet him in the street or accept a greeting, and all sorts of other absurd customs derived from pagan superstition are in circulation.<sup>16</sup>

It appears that Luther also urged people to pray Count Moritz to death; and that this practice continued into the nineteenth century, at least in Bavaria, Swabia, and Switzerland.<sup>17</sup> For the obvious reason that the Scriptures, though "living and active" (Heb 4:12), are not magical incantations, such use is discouraged. But praying this against an enemy—*your* enemy—is not.

Again, we are not certain of the historical setting here. It may be that David has in mind Ahithophel (2 Sam 15:31; 16:20–17:23) or Doeg (1 Sam 22:6–23). The NT applies it to Judas (Acts 1:20; cf. Matt 27:39). Paul appears to cite it more broadly in light of the Christian suffering persecution (1 Cor 4:12). That no enemy is named suggests that this psalm includes many contexts and many enemies. Ultimately, it is a prayer for salvation: "Help me, O LORD my God! Save me according to your steadfast love!" (109:26). And as it ends, it offers a robust prayer of *faith* that the Lord does hear and will answer:

With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord;  
I will praise him in the midst of the throng.  
For he stands at the right hand of the needy one,  
to save him from those who condemn his soul to death. (109:30–31)

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<sup>15</sup> See Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Four Psalms of Comfort* (1526): vol. 14, p. 257, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–).

<sup>16</sup> Johann Friedrich Heine (*dissertation*, University of Helmstedt, 1708), cited in Walter Dürig, "Die Verwendung des sogenannten Fluchpsalms 108 (109) im Volksglauben und in der Liturgie," *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 27 (1976): 71–84, 77.

<sup>17</sup> See Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 58.

**Psalms 57–59: Do Not Destroy**

So far, all the psalms we have discussed are found in Book V of the Psalter. Amid much scholarly debate over the meaning of ordering and editing of the Psalter, I am not sure what to make of this.<sup>18</sup> Turning to Psalms 57–59, we leave Book V and jump back to Book II.

In the very persuasive article by Gary Anderson, the common superscriptions and the historical scenarios described in 1 Samuel 26 provide the key to the meaning of these psalms.<sup>19</sup> First notice the superscriptions:

Psalm 57: To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy.

A Miktam of David, when he fled from Saul, in the cave.

Psalm 58: To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy.

A Miktam of David.

Psalm 59: To the choirmaster: according to Do Not Destroy.

A Miktam of David, when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him.

These three psalms form their own unit based on the superscriptions. Psalm 60 is likewise to the choirmaster as well as a Miktam of David, but the tune is different: “according to Shushan Eduth.” And the same goes for Psalm 56: “To the choirmaster: according to The Dove on Far-off Terebinths. A Miktam of David.” This leaves these three psalms (57–59) in the curious position of bearing the same tune: “Do Not Destroy.”

Where does “Do Not Destroy” come from? And how does this tie into the account of David recorded in 1 Samuel? The superscription for Psalm 57 locates the story: “when he fled from Saul, in the cave.” This cave incident first appears in 1 Samuel 24, where David cut a corner of Saul’s robe while he was “relieving himself” (see 1 Sam 24:3). Though David’s men see this as the occasion by which the Lord delivers Saul into David’s hand (1 Sam 24:4), David responds: “The LORD forbid that

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. David Howard, “Editorial Activity in the Psalter: A State-of-the-Field Survey,” *Word and World* IX, no. 3 (1989): 274–285; J. Clinton McCann, *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, JSOTSS 159 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Gerald Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985); Norman Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book*, JSOTSS 222 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

<sup>19</sup> Gary A. Anderson, “King David and the Psalms of Imprecation,” *Pro Ecclesia* XV, no. 3 (2006): 267–280. Regarding the function of the superscriptions in general, see the helpful article by Brevard Childs, “Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16 (1971): 137–150. As an aside, it is lamentable that the otherwise wonderful resource—*Reading the Psalms with Luther*—omits in every occasion the superscriptions to the Psalms.

I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD's anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the LORD's anointed" (1 Sam 24:6). Again, two chapters later, Saul pursued David into the wilderness of Ziph (1 Sam 26:2). While he slept, David and Abishai entered the camp. Abishai again said to David, "God has given your enemy into your hand this day. Now please let me pin him to the earth with one stroke of the spear, and I will not strike him twice" (1 Sam 26:8). Here is the kicker: "But David said to Abishai, 'Do not destroy him, for who can put out his hand against the LORD's anointed and be guiltless?'" (1 Sam 26:9).

These two occasions locate these psalms in David's flight from Saul's attacks. But there is some difficulty matching the tenor of these psalms with the actions of David. The second episode more than the first shows David's total self-emptying for the sake of Saul. In fact, he reproves Saul's guard for failing to protect their master (26:16). However, the psalm itself is loaded with a bloodthirsty quest for vengeance:

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;  
 when he aims his arrows, let them be blunted.  
 Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime,  
 like the stillborn child who 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 he sees the vengeance;  
 he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked. (Ps 58:6–10)

Especially disturbing is that last part: "the righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will bathe his feet in the blood of the wicked." But what makes this most disturbing is the way in which David *does not* rejoice when the Lord finally has vengeance on Saul five chapters later (1 Sam 31).<sup>20</sup> Anderson solves this by seeing in these psalms the very solution to what they seek: "the bloodthirsty desire for vengeance is overcome" by way of the psalms themselves.<sup>21</sup> In fact, the psalms give the self-control needed in each of these encounters, and they continue to bestow

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<sup>20</sup> In fact, the story continues in 2 Samuel with David's mourning: "Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them, and so did all the men who were with him. And they mourned and wept and fasted until evening for Saul and for Jonathan his son and for the people of the LORD and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. And David said to the young man who told him, 'Where do you come from?' And he answered, 'I am the son of a sojourner, an Amalekite.' David said to him, 'How is it you were not afraid to put out your hand to destroy the LORD's anointed?' Then David called one of the young men and said, 'Go, execute him.' And he struck him down so that he died. And David said to him, 'Your blood be on your head, for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the LORD's anointed'" (2 Sam 1:11–16).

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, "King David and the Psalms of Imprecation," 276.

self-control on countless generations of Christians who pray them when fear and rage are at their highest.

Erich Zenger rightly describes Psalm 58 as “a cry for help coming from those who are terrified to the point of death.”<sup>22</sup> This “terrified to the point of death” is not an experience we go through daily, but perhaps occasionally—and, no doubt, our members too! It is the symptom of deep depression. It is the working of a guilty conscience. It is the actual fear of a terrible enemy. Yet, this is an experience in which, no matter how much it seems to be the case, we are not alone. Christ himself, alike us in all things except sin, experiences terror to the point of death in Gethsemane. Psalm 58 may just have been on his lips. The cup he prayed to be taken from him was to be drunk. Perhaps he prayed the enemies to drink it down to its dregs. That is what happened, but it all happened in Christ, who became sin who knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21). Dietrich Bonhoeffer well displays this christological interpretation:

God’s righteous vengeance on the wicked has already been achieved. The blood of the wicked has already flowed. God’s judgment on death upon godless humanity has been spoken. God’s righteousness is fulfilled on the cross of Christ. . . . Jesus Christ died the death of the godless; he was stricken by God’s wrath and vengeance. His blood is the blood which God’s righteousness required for the transgression of his commandments. God’s vengeance has been carried out in the midst of the earth in a manner more fearful than even this psalm knows about. Christ, the innocent, died the death of the wicked, so that we need not die. . . . Christ bore the whole vengeance of God for all.<sup>23</sup>

### Can We Pray the Imprecatory Psalms Today?

But can we even talk this way? Can we pray these prayers? That is a question that has troubled the church in recent years. We are not alone in asking this. One more brief anecdote: I have a friend from high school who is a devout Muslim. A few years back he posted the following on Facebook:

Muslims: why do we tolerate supplications that beckon that God bring calamity upon ‘enemies’? The concept of an ‘enemy’ is far too flimsy, too arbitrary to be imposed as a guideline to call upon God’s wrath. It stinks of a certain ‘us vs them’ mentality that underlies too much of our collective approach to the global challenges we face. We should oppose injustice, hate, greed for their evil, regardless the purveyors or victims thereof. We should be as harsh on our own

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<sup>22</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “On Psalm 58: A Sermon on a Psalm of Vengeance,” in *Meditating on the Word* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1986), 82–84.

transgressions as we are on those of others. Why not, then, ask God to guide us all to what He loves and what is good, just, and righteous?

I do not normally respond to his posts, but this one struck me particularly. So I said:

Abdul, Christians have a whole category of Psalms termed ‘imprecatory.’ These are Psalms (prayers, even hymns) specifically asking for God’s wrath against our enemies. I believe it’s healthy to pray these—not least because we are thereby entrusting wrath to God, who alone has the right to judge, and not taking any such wrath up into our own hands. It’s also important to pray these because often the chief target (as someone mentioned above) is the enemy within us: our hate, our anger, and our murderous thoughts. Sorry to butt in—I hope it’s received in a helpful way. Also, it’s noteworthy that we have similar questions to wrestle with. Peace.

I am not sure what exactly this indicates, but it received seven “likes”—only one of which bore an Anglo name.<sup>24</sup> Perhaps, if nothing else, it shows that there is a true violence toward our enemies that demands justice, but also a desire for mercy that we struggle to balance.

This balance of justice and mercy often rubs us wrong. Gemma Hinricher, prioress of the Carmelite convent at Dachau, offers an example of this struggle in a unique context:

As early as 1965 we received permission to pray the Office in the vernacular. However, this vernacular prayer, which had become necessary and requisite for the sake of the tourists, also brought with it serious problems for our recitation of prayer in choir, because of the so-called imprecatory or vengeance psalms, and the cursing passages in a number of psalms. We were soon tempted to return to Latin, for no matter how much the vernacular brought home to us the riches of the psalms, the Latin had at least covered up the weaknesses of the psalms as prayer. In the immediate vicinity of the concentration camp, we felt ourselves unable to say out loud psalms that spoke of a punishing, angry God and of the destruction of enemies, often in hideous images, and whose content was the desire for destruction and vengeance, in the presence of people who came into our church agitated and mentally distressed by their visit to the camp. . . . It is probably understandable that neither verses nor whole psalms of cursing, neither desires for destruction nor for vengeance can be uttered in the midst of such a stillness.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The interaction took place July 18, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Gemma Hinricher, “Die Fluch- und Vergeltungspsalmen im Stundengebet,” *Bibel und Kirche* 35 (1980): 55.

Notice what she said: “*we felt ourselves unable to say out loud psalms that spoke of a punishing, angry God and of the destruction of enemies . . . neither verses nor whole psalms of cursing, neither desires for destruction nor for vengeance can be uttered in the midst of such a stillness.*” There was, for Gemma, an inability to even utter these words of God. Why is that?

Perhaps Gemma could be applauded for discerning law and gospel. Perhaps she was censoring God’s word out of fear. I understand her response, particularly in that context. However, such sympathies are not unilateral. This sort of censorship is sadly all too common in the church—even apart from such horrific and painful contexts. It has become a cliché in the church to pit the New Testament’s love against the Old Testament’s wrath. The prominent biblical scholar Claus Westermann puts it this way:

In the Old Testament period . . . whatever happened between God and man or between God and His people had to take place this side of death. . . . Jesus’ mission to suffer for others includes his enemies as well. *So the petition against enemies is thereby eradicated from the prayers of God’s people . . . Although petition against enemies is out of the question for Christians*, the passages in the psalms where we meet such petitions remind us what had to happen before God’s congregation could cease to be a group ranged against other groups and become a community for all humanity.<sup>26</sup>

C. S. Lewis also saw these psalms as *beneath* the dignity and morality of Christians. In fact, he even goes so far as to say that these psalms are *sinful*, but they at least reveal the true humanity of the people of God. He adds that the only way a Christian may pray these today is allegorically.<sup>27</sup> Again, considering Psalm 137, an early twentieth-century cardinal of the Roman Church said:

The Psalm ends in imprecations: but we do not allow ourselves to repeat them; *we are not of the Old Testament*, tolerating the laws of retaliation. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. Our lips are purified by the fire of Christian charity and utter no words of hate.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms*, trans. J. R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 299–300, emphasis added.

<sup>27</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1958), 136.

<sup>28</sup> Cardinal Mercier of Belgium, “Coronation-Day Sermon” (1916). Cited in Surburg, “The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms,” 89, emphasis added. Cf. T. K. Cheyne, *The Christian Use of the Psalms* (London: Isbister and Company, 1899), “I fear that our unmitigated adoption of the Psalter as it stands may counteract that spirit of love which is one half of Christianity” (26–27).



The only hate going on in that sermon is a hatred for the Jews—those *Old Testament* folk. The situation is such that today's monastics are not even required to pray the imprecatory psalms at all.<sup>29</sup> What would St. Benedict say?

Notice how the impulse against these psalms reveals a deeper theological infection within the church. In the second century, Marcion argued that the god of the Old Testament was not the same as that of the New. Israel's god was lesser, weaker, and ultimately inferior to the Christian God. Though rightly declared a heretic, this heresy never quite died out. It received a gust of energy with the famous historian Adolf von Harnack.<sup>30</sup> Today it plagues our members all too frequently. We speak in terms of "that was then, this is now." Or, "that's just not what a *Christian* would say." One modern commentator says, "They belong to an age of religion which has been *displaced* by Christianity."<sup>31</sup> And regarding Psalm 129, Malcolm Guite ponders poetically,

I understand this psalmist, and I'd rather  
Complain to God than not, but still I wonder  
If he was right to call on God to smite  
His enemies. As though that holy thunder  
Were just a private weapon, and the fight  
Were always just, and God was on our side  
And we were always only in the right.  
Better to ask for mercy, mercy wide  
As the wide ocean. If my enemy  
And I both ask, we will not be denied.<sup>32</sup>

Such sentiments are certainly pious, but they assume the Psalms to be those exclusively of men, rather than of God. If of men alone, then they surely can err. If of God, then let us not possess piety greater than his.

Now, the question is this: Can a Christian pray these psalms? Jesus said, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt 5:44). Are these psalms the sort of *prayer* Jesus had in mind? *The Lutheran Study Bible* notes:

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<sup>29</sup> Anderson, "King David and the Psalms of Imprecation," 267.

<sup>30</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1924); trans. J. E. Steely and L. D. Bierma, *Marcion: The Gospel of an Alien God* (Durham: Labyrinth Press, 1990). Cf. John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea—The Formation of Christian Theology: Volume I* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>31</sup> C. A. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2 vols. (1906–1907).

<sup>32</sup> Malcolm Guite, *David's Crown: Sounding the Psalms* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2021), 129.

Christians should understand that the violent outbursts in these psalms are not prescriptions for the behavior of God's people but illustrations of emotions that God's people will indeed experience. Christians today who lose loved ones to war or to violent criminals will have these same feelings of anger and revenge. Praying the imprecatory psalms can help God's people express their anguish before God rather than act out their feelings in an unjust way.<sup>33</sup>

Absolutely, the *actions* of vengeance are not "prescriptions" that we are given to carry out. Perhaps, however, the *prayers* are. These prayers allow us to entrust our anger and revenge to God, with the very words of God, rather than taking matters into our own hands.<sup>34</sup>

### To What End? Letting Vengeance Be God's

Commenting on Deuteronomy, St. Paul urges: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord'" (Rom 12:19; cf. Deut 32:35). The Lord is the God of vengeance. He is the judge: God Almighty. This God of wrath troubles us, scares us. However, as one scholar noted, "A God who knows no wrath requires no cult: *religio esse non potest, ubi metus nullus est* [there can be no religion where there is no fear]."<sup>35</sup> Luther also orients us toward this God in the Small Catechism, as each of the commandments rehearses the refrain: "*we should fear and love God.*" We fear him because of his justice, his making wrongs right, his power. As Jesus says, "Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt 10:28). And yet, in all of this, we recognize that *he* is God, and not we ourselves. Ultimately, these psalms of vengeance are prayers for justice, for God to be God. It is akin to praying: "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt 6:10). The punishment of sin, the destruction of evil, the justification of the world—this is God's work, and not ours. That is what we ask with these imprecatory psalms. That is how we pray and why.

We pray these psalms so that God would do the justifying. Like David, who fled from Saul, we pray and *do not destroy*. These psalms, then, are for us and for our

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<sup>33</sup> TLSB, 879.

<sup>34</sup> It might be interesting here to note that this sort of language is not confined to the Psalter. You will also see the desire for vengeance in the Pentateuch (Cf. Num 10:35), the Prophets (Cf. Jer 11:20; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21–23; 20:12), and even the New Testament (Cf. Rev 6:9–10). Statistically, the imprecatory psalms are quoted with greater frequency than any other psalm grouping. Cf. Wenham, *The Goodness of God*, 157–158. So the idea of these prayers being sub-Christian is not only a denial of the inspiration of the Scriptures, but also a false conception of who God is as presented therein.

<sup>35</sup> Jan Assmann, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel* (Munich: Carl Friedrich von Siemens Stiftung, 1992), 87. He cites Lactantius (c. 250–c. 325), "*De Ira Dei*," in *Patrologia cursus completus: Series latina*, 217 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1844–1864), 7:113.

neighbor. They flow from faith, not anger.<sup>36</sup> They confront the reality of sin and shame and evil and suffering—and then trust all to the Lord, who does all things well (see Mark 7:37), to cause his good and gracious will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.<sup>37</sup> These are the prayers of victims and an awareness that God stands with the victimized. And when we pray these we also stand with the victimized. They are prayers for peace, when there is no peace (Jer 6:14).<sup>38</sup>

There is no point in praying these psalms if there is no violence, no suffering, no sin, and no shame. But if there is—for you, for your member, for your community, or for your world—then these psalms cannot be avoided. St. John says, “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). With sin comes anger and bitterness and wrath. Though baptized and redeemed, we are still human. And part of our humanness is the reality of pain and suffering attendant to the fall. And when we suffer, we cry out. These psalms give us the “earthly” words that match every passion of humanity, while remaining words of God.<sup>39</sup>

It is important to realize that these imprecatory psalms are what we call *primary theology*, as opposed to *secondary theology*.<sup>40</sup> That is, they are the actual *doing* of theology, not a systematic discussion *about* theology. They are actual prayers, not discussions *about* prayer. This is not to say theoretical discussion is bad (that is what we are doing now!)—it is just not primary. When someone is crushed under the weight of his sin, he is not looking for a discussion about concupiscence, or the distinction between actual and original sin. What he needs is the forgiveness of sins. So it is with these psalms: when our enemy has us surrounded and defeated, we do not want a discussion of whether enemies really exist, we want our enemies to be judged and thrown back! In a different context, we may reflect on what an enemy is; during an assault, however, we want God to get up and do something! That is what these psalms are all about: they are “go-get-’em” psalms.

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<sup>36</sup> John Wenham notes that cursing in the Scriptures cannot be read in terms of the way cursing works today, which is often reactionary and directed against our enemy. Rather, “the cursings of the psalmist . . . are serious, premeditated, religious.” And further, “they are not utterances to the people concerned.” He concludes, “The imprecations are therefore fundamentally expressions of trust in God, rather than of hate for man.” *The Goodness of God*, 161.

<sup>37</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus (*Theology of the Psalms*, trans. Keith Crim [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992]) summarizes this point well: “To set up a polarity of love and vengeance would involve a total misunderstanding of biblical truth. . . . In this perspective it is inappropriate to polarize the issue and appeal to New Testament love” (67).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. J. Clinton McCann Jr., “Psalms,” *Theological Interpretation of the Old Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 163.

<sup>39</sup> See Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2000), 88.

<sup>40</sup> For the terminology, see Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992).

Now, there are two important distinctions to be made before we send God with his angel armies. First, in each of these imprecatory psalms, it should be clear that the psalmist's enemy is God's enemy: "Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? . . . I count them my enemies" (Ps 139:21, 22). These enemies are not made on a whim. They are not subjectively enemies, as if it was simply a personal matter, or dislike. The enemies are marked by their violent hatred of God's name and persecution thereof.

Second, because the nature of an enemy is one who opposes God's name, we often find such an enemy within our own heart. We may find that we pray these imprecatory psalms against ourselves—that is the reality of what it means to be *simul iustus et peccator*.<sup>41</sup> So, when we pray "Thy will be done," we pray that God "breaks and hinders every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature, which do not want us to hallow God's name or let His kingdom come" (SC, Third Petition).<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, the goal of praying these imprecatory psalms is to trust the justifying work to God alone. He alone sets the world aright, and he does it on the cross of Calvary. This is the *crux*, literally, that turns the prayer of vengeance into the prayer of forgiveness. It is on the cross that anger and mercy, justice and forgiveness hang together. Sinner and saint are set before our eyes in the body of Christ crucified—there, law and gospel meet.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, these psalms find their fulfillment and recapitulation in Christ. Bonhoeffer puts it elegantly:

God's vengeance did not fall on the sinners, but on the only sinless one, the Son of God, who stood in the place of sinners. Jesus Christ bore the vengeance of God, which the psalm asks to be carried out. Christ calmed God's anger against sin and prayed in the hour of the carrying out of the divine judgment: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing!" No one other than he, who himself bore the wrath of God, could pray like this. That was the end of all false thoughts about the love of a God who does not take sin very seriously. God hates and judges the enemies of God in the only righteous one, the one

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Horace D. Hummel, *The Word Becoming Flesh* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1979), 434: "The real subject of these psalms is not individuals or nations whom one should love or pray for as an absolute alternative, but (of a piece with the stylized, typical language of the Psalter in general) archetypes of the 'demonic,' of that primal evil which always and everywhere opposes God, His work, and His people, ultimately of course, the Antichrist or Satan who indwells the wicked instead of Christ (and since we remain *simul peccator*, indwells also us)."

<sup>42</sup> Quotations from the Small Catechism are from *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayerbook of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1970), 57–59: "It is therefore nowhere a matter of personal conflict. Nowhere does the one who prays these psalms want to take revenge into his own hands. He calls for the wrath of God alone. . . . Thus the imprecatory psalm leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God which forgives enemies."

who prays for forgiveness for God's enemies. Only in the cross of Jesus Christ is the love of God to be found.

So the psalm of vengeance leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God that forgives enemies. I cannot forgive the enemies of God by myself, only the crucified Christ can; and I can forgive through him. So the carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all in Jesus Christ.<sup>44</sup>

### A Healthy Recovery

*"So the carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all in Jesus Christ,"* Bonhoeffer asserts. That is where we are to find our *healthy* recovery as a church and the people of God. The recovery of these imprecatory psalms is good for our *health*, our pastoral care, and the spiritual health of our members. John Kleinig profoundly notes that "much more is accomplished by prayer than by anything else I do."<sup>45</sup> He is right, and I think these psalms have a role to play.

One goal of these prayers is self-realization. When fear overwhelms us, we lose sight of who we are. We panic. We forget the basics and think the worst. These prayers allow us to make the abstract real. They give form to our pain, voice to our silence, and legitimacy to the injustice we have born. By giving us the words that echo our feelings, and placing them entirely on God, we trust not only our enemies to him, but also our fears and pain and despair. But without these psalms, without these words to God, our fear might run full course through us, without ever slowing down until it destroys us from the inside out.

Another health benefit is the reality of pent-up aggression. When anger festers without a proper outlet, no amount of self-control can contain its rage. Trying to keep our anger down does not minimize the violence, but multiplies it! The proper and healthy way to manage anger is through prayer and repentance—recognizing that anger is murder (Matt 5:21–26), and that we have no right to be angry for our own sake. The only one who has any right to anger is the sinless One, and at the peak of the injustice raised against him, he said, "Father, forgive them" (Luke 23:34). By making our anger conscious and confessing it before God, we remove its power and destructiveness.

On another note, while certainly beneficial to the one praying, there is also a health benefit for others. By praying these psalms—perhaps even when we are not under the distress of enemies—we unite our voice with those who do suffer. We gain sympathy for others and share their suffering, fulfilling the command to "bear one

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<sup>44</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Prayerbook of the Bible*, 175.

<sup>45</sup> John W. Kleinig, *Grace upon Grace* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 151.

another's burdens" (Gal 6:2). These prayers make us aware of the real violence and shame and guilt and despair that plague our people.

Finally, and certainly the greatest health benefit to praying these psalms, is that by praying for vengeance you are not taking vengeance into your own hands. I suppose that makes for healthy living, at least for your enemy!

So how should we recover these psalms? I noted previously that only one of the psalms we have studied appears in *Lutheran Service Book*: Psalm 139. That being the case, a liturgical revival of the imprecatory psalms will be difficult. Perhaps they could find their way into Advent or Lent midweek services—connecting the prayers of violence with the prayers of repentance. Another way is through our hymnody. While some imprecation has been cut from our hymnody, there is hope yet!<sup>46</sup> Consider some of these imprecatory hymn stanzas: "Lord, put to shame Thy foes who breathe defiance And vainly make their might their sole reliance" (*TLH* 269:2). Or, "Our foes repel, our wrongs redress" (*TLH* 64:3). And then one of my personal favorites:

Be of good cheer; your cause belongs  
To Him who can avenge your wrongs;  
Leave it to Him, our Lord.  
Though hidden yet from mortal eyes,  
His Gideon shall for you arise,  
Uphold you and His Word. (*LSB* 666:2)

While there are a number of hymns containing imprecations, none of them names names.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, the Psalms often list names—typically in the superscription. Names make concrete the abstract. This is good because then the enemy can be located and described and heard and cast out. For this reason, we should take up the imprecatory psalms into our hymnody in specific contexts. Giving names and faces to our enemies—whether it be those espousing false doctrine or demanding a life of fleshly desires—will help turn our anger into joyous trust in God alone.

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<sup>46</sup> Consider Luther's "Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word" (*LSB* 655). In 1541, the Turkish army threatened to take Vienna. The German rulers called for prayers for safety from these Islamic forces. Luther responded by writing the original German (*Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort*) for a prayer service in Wittenberg. Convinced that the church was threatened not only by the Turkish army of Sultan Suleiman but also by the pope, Luther began his text as follows: "Lord, keep us in thy Word and work, Restrain the murderous Pope and Turk, Who fain would tear from off thy throne Christ Jesus, thy beloved Son." Our version today has no imprecation against pope or Turk specifically. We now sing in stanza 1: "Curb those who by deceit or sword Would wrest the kingdom from Your Son And bring to naught all He has done."

<sup>47</sup> See Chad L. Bird, "Singing against Our Enemies," *Gottesdienst* (Trinity, 2006).

The greatest need we have for a proper recovery of these psalms is in our pastoral care of those who suffer. A proper theology of the cross will aid our ability to diagnose and apply these psalms, but more than anything else, we need to let our suffering members know that they can cry out to God with their pain. The victims do not need to be silenced. They do not need piously to keep it to themselves. They can scream in anger to God, against God, and—ultimately—with God.

Consider the story I began with of the woman who lost two sons in unrelated incidents. She needed to mourn and grieve and be angry with God, but was never given permission to do so. In fact, she was burdened by the thought that God *had nothing to do with it!* These psalms allow us to say otherwise, and in so doing, apply a real dosage of the gospel in a most unexpected way with the confidence that these words—*God's words*—are well-pleasing to him.

### Conclusion

Finally, when it comes to the Psalms, Rick Stuckwisch is right on: “It’s not so much a question of what *we* should do with the psalms, but what the psalms shall do with us.”<sup>48</sup> We must remember that these are God’s words we take up onto our lips. Christ prays these psalms vicariously as our representative and as representative of humanity. As Bonhoeffer notes, “*He* accuses the godless, *He* calls down upon them God’s vengeance and justice, and *He* gives Himself for all the godless with His innocent suffering on the cross.”<sup>49</sup>

I urge, then, that you pick up the psalms of vengeance and pray them. In doing so, you are praying for my member whose sons were killed, one after the other. You are praying for the broken, the depressed, the persecuted, and all the victims of unjust violence. You are begging God to be God as he has promised to be, to set the world aright. With these psalms, you hold God to his word, trusting Christ’s death and resurrection to be what it is—an end to suffering, the final verdict of justice and life, and the ultimate mercy of God. This is what is desperately needed today: hope for the despairing and comfort for the broken-hearted. “Where *everything* speaks *against* God, those who pray them attribute *everything* to God.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> D. Richard Stuckwisch, “Praying the Psalms at Home: A Prayer Book for the Laity Coming in 2006,” *Day by Day We Magnify Thee: Psalms in the Life of the Church, The Good Shepherd Institute: Pastoral Theology and Sacred Music for the Church. Journal for the Third Annual Conference* (November 3–5, 2002): 97–114, 109.

<sup>49</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Sermon on a Psalm of Wrath: Psalm 58 (July 11, 1937),” in *Meditating on the Word*, ed. and trans. David McL. Gracie (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1987), 96.

<sup>50</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?*, 88.