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Don't Get Even, Get Mad! Imprecatory Prayer as a Neglected Spiritual Discipline: (Psalm 69)

KEVIN J. YOUNGBLOOD

“I don't get mad, I get even!” stated the bumper sticker emblazoned on the back of the car that had just cut me off, suddenly pulling into the middle of traffic stampeding at fifty miles per hour. I slammed on my breaks and got a good close look at those blood red words inscribed on black adhesive. Judging from the way this driver operated his car, I believed every word of it.

It has been several years since my last encounter with that vindictive bumper sticker so popular in the late 80s and early 90s, but that motto still comes to mind occasionally, especially when I am reading the book of Psalms. I am sure that that last sentence sounded strange. Why would I think of the clearly unbiblical motto, “I don't get mad, I get even!” when reading the Psalms? The reason is that many of the psalms express a deep desire for vengeance—for God's vengeance—on the wicked, unruly, unjust and abusive people that exploit the weak for their personal advantage. The great difference between that bumper sticker and the psalms that ask God to exact vengeance on the enemies of his people is that the psalms adopt the opposite of the old bumper sticker motto—not “I don't get mad, I get even!” but “I don't get even, I get mad!” These psalms vent the rage of saints who recognize that vengeance is exclusively God's territory, but who at the same time feel the injustices of this world very deeply and who desperately want God to correct the inequities that always seem to leave the righteous/weak at the mercy (or mercilessness) of the wicked/powerful.

Admittedly, these types of psalms are difficult for most Christians to read, much less pray. The anger they express is raw, intense, violent and full of bitter invectives. Consider just a few of the more than thirty angry outbursts peppered throughout the Psalms.

Psalm 54.5 May he repay my enemies with calamity. Because of your faithfulness destroy them. (All translations are the author's unless otherwise noted.)

Psalm 55.15 May death mistreat them, may they descend alive into Sheol!

Psalm 56.7 By no means let them escape, bring down your wrath on the nations.

Psalm 58.6 God, shatter their teeth in their mouths; Crush their lion-like jaws, O LORD!

Psalm 69.28 May they be wiped out of the book of life and may they not be listed among the righteous.

Psalm 109.9 May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children wander aimlessly begging and imploring far removed from their ruined homes.

Psalm 137.9 Blessed is he who seizes and dashes your infants against the rocks.

How are contemporary believers supposed to pray such horrific fates down on their enemies, especially in the light of Jesus' command to love our enemies and bless those who curse us? Throughout church history Christians have wrestled with the tension created by the presence of such prayers alongside Jesus' ethic of love and forgiveness. In fact, so offensive are these vindictive prayers that they are not even required reading in the Liturgy of the Hours or the Daily Offices of most liturgical communions.¹ The habit of Christians throughout the centuries has been to ignore these embarrassing expressions of raw human emotion, but this neglect has come at great cost both to our faith and to our witness in the world. Has ignoring these disarmingly honest prayers made us more loving, forgiving, righteous, or just? No, in fact, I would argue just the opposite. The neglect of such prayers has suppressed very real emotions that even the most sanctified among us do and should feel, emotions that God himself feels. The tacit denial that such emotions are part of the Christian experience of faith often results in passive-aggressive behaviors and deep-seated resentments that poison relationships both in the church and in the world.

What I propose in the paragraphs that follow is that far from contradicting or undermining Jesus' commands to love our enemies and to bless those who curse us, the imprecatory psalms can be the very means by which we submit to and obey Jesus' stringent ethic of mercy and love. Four perspectives should be brought to bear on biblical imprecations that can help Christians appropriate these prayers for spiritual formation and relational healing. First, these bitter curses must be viewed against the background of ancient Near Eastern rhetoric for an understanding of their intended function. Second, they must be viewed in the context of the covenantal structure of Israel's life with God for an understanding of their place in Israel's evolving conceptions of justice and shalom. Third, as suggested by the headings of all but one of the imprecatory psalms, these prayers must be viewed in the context of David's struggle against his and God's enemies. Finally, the trajectory of these prayers must be traced to their culmination in Christ's confrontation with the principalities and powers that he disarmed and defeated at the cross and his consequent ethic of love and mercy. After due consideration of these various perspectives, possibilities for reclaiming such prayers for Christian practice will naturally emerge.

RETRIBUTIONAL RHETORIC IN THE BIBLE AND THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The current cultural climate of political correctness cannot abide the powerful rhetoric of imprecation. Such prayers are heard only as "hate speech" and consequently are immediately censored. The language of these prayers, however, was far more common in the cultural world of ancient Israel. In fact, curses were a key rhetorical safeguard of the social and cosmic orders. Jan Assman notes their prolific use throughout Egypt and Mesopotamia with special attention to their function:

Imprecation was a central instrument in ancient foreign policy. All contracts had to be sealed with a sacred oath; breaking that oath entailed consequences of the most terrible kind, which were explicitly depicted in the form of maledictions . . . These curses have the structure of potentially performative utterances: they are self-fulfilling, but only under certain conditions . . . Therefore, we must regard these images as symbolic acts of deterrence, of fending off by magic, rather than as acts of subjugation, which would after all imply a form of inclusion in the Egyptian world.²

1. Pope Paul VI, *Apostolic Constitution, Promulgation, The Divine Office* (November 1, 1970), sec. 4, <http://www.adoremus.org/LaudisCanticum.html> (accessed July 21, 2011). Regarding these portions of the Psalms, the Constitution states: "In this new arrangement of the Psalms a few of the Psalms and verses that are somewhat harsh in tone have been omitted, especially because of the difficulties anticipated from their use in vernacular celebration." Cf. *Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979). Note, for example, p. 964, which prescribes Psalm 109 for Wednesday of the seventh week of the Easter season. Verses 5–19, the imprecatory section, are placed in parentheses, indicating the editors' suggestion that they be omitted from the reading of the Daily Office.

2. Jan Assman, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, trans. Andrew Jenkins (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 151.

By locating the origin of these curses in legal contracts, Assman clarifies the judicial nature of imprecation in the ancient Near East and in Israel. When the normal, human machinery of justice failed, imprecations were in place to appeal to divine justice. While law protected the social order, imprecations protected the law. This much is clear from the Hittite treaty structure mirrored in the book of Deuteronomy, which included a detailed list of curses that would befall the person who transgressed the terms of the covenant. Similar curses commonly adorned boundary stones and graves to deter those who might otherwise be tempted to encroach on legally protected or sacred space.³

Thus, the curses contained in the imprecatory psalms are not the product of the psalmist's depraved, vindictive mind, but an appeal to the covenant curses outlined by God himself. These prayers simply ask God to make good on his promise to preserve justice in the midst of a fallen world where human justice often fails.

CURSES AND THE COVENANTAL STRUCTURE OF ISRAEL'S LIFE WITH GOD

As mentioned in the previous section, imprecation was woven into the very fabric of the covenants that defined Israel's relationship with God. For example, God promised Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, but the one who curses you I will curse" (Gen 12.3). Such a statement invites imprecation as an act of faith in the covenant fidelity of God. Furthermore, it eliminates the vigilante approach to justice that inevitably results in the escalation of violence. This principle has its classic expression in the words of Deuteronomy 32.35: "Vengeance and retribution belong to me!"

Psalm 69 provides an excellent example of the profoundly covenantal nature of imprecation. The key to this psalm resides in verse 4: "Those who hate me for no reason are more than the hairs on my head. Those seeking to destroy me are countless, those who accuse me falsely. What I did not steal must I now repay?" The issue here is clearly one of false accusation leveled against the psalmist by a perjuring witness. One immediately thinks of the penalty for perjury prescribed in the Law of Moses.

If a malicious witness comes forward to accuse someone of wrongdoing, then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days, and the judges shall make a thorough inquiry. If the witness is a false witness, having testified falsely against another, *then you shall do to the false witness just as the false witness had meant to do to the other*. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. (Deut 19.16–19 NRSV, emphasis mine)

The law clearly called for exact retribution upon anyone who would dare undermine justice in ancient Israel by perjury. When we compare the section of imprecations in Psalm 69 with the section that describes the pain and persecution the psalmist suffers at the hands of his false accusers, we notice a remarkable correspondence. The psalmist's request that his enemies' table become a snare, a retribution and a trap (v. 22) corresponds exactly to the activity of the false accusers who "poison my food and for my thirst they make me drink vinegar" (v. 21). The prayer that the perjurers' eyes be darkened (v. 23) compensates for the psalmist's blindness because his "eyes are worn out from seeking my God" (v. 3). The psalmist's desire to see these enemies estranged from their families and the community of faith (vv. 25, 28) is motivated by the fact that their false accusations have resulted in the psalmist's estrangement from his family and faith community (v. 8). Every curse corresponds to something the psalmist is suffering or will potentially suffer if his enemies get their way. The prayer conforms exactly to the retributive principle outlined in Deuteronomy 19.16–19.

One might well ask at this point whether there isn't a higher calling for disciples of Christ than simple

3. Jan Assmann, "When Justice Fails: Jurisdiction and Imprecation in Ancient Egypt and the Near East," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 78 (1992): 149–162.

quid pro quo retribution. Certainly there is and we must keep in mind that there is movement in the Psalms. These prayers are dynamic rather than static. They serve to guide us on a spiritual journey that dares to plumb the depths of suffering, despair and the dark recesses of the human heart only to reemerge into the light of freedom, forgiveness and an irrepressible joy that even the world's worst evil cannot overwhelm. The point here is that even in the darkest experiences of faith the Psalms submit to the discipline of the covenant and do not allow personal vengeance to go unchecked.

The Psalms, however, do not leave us in these dark places. After confronting the reality of evil in the world and participating in God's own wrath regarding miscarriages of justice, the Psalms move on to entertain possible fates other than simple retribution for the enemies of God and his people. Psalm 83.16–18, for example, contains the following startling petition:

Fill their faces with disgrace so that they might seek your name, Yahweh. May they be ashamed and utterly horrified so that they might diligently search or be destroyed, so that they might know that you, whose name is Yahweh, you alone are exalted over all the world.

This petition reveals that though the rhetoric of imprecation expresses itself in absolute terms, at the same time the hope exists that divine judgment might lead enemies to repent of their opposition to Israel and accept Yahweh's universal sovereignty. This comes as no surprise when one recognizes the covenantal roots of these imprecations. The intent from the beginning was that all families of the earth might be blessed through the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12.1–3). Yet such hopes for the conversion of enemies to Yahweh can only be seriously entertained after the heinous nature of the injustices they perpetrate have been thoroughly grasped and renounced. Outrage is the only proper response to such abuse and exploitation and it is the only emotion strong enough to provoke the enemies' repentance.

IMPRECATORY PRAYER AND DAVID'S RISE TO POWER

The vast majority of psalms containing imprecations are associated by their headings with David. One of the unfortunate oversights in Psalms scholarship, as well as in the church's reading of the Psalms in general, is a tendency to neglect psalm headings or disregard them altogether as secondary and therefore unhistorical. Nevertheless, these headings constitute an integral part of the Psalms in the final form of the Hebrew text, and they clearly encourage readers to identify Davidic psalms with various stories of his rise to power in 1 and 2 Samuel.

This connection becomes especially important when reading psalms that invoke curses against one's enemies. Though David prayed for God to exact vengeance on his enemies, David himself exhibited remarkable restraint with regard to vengeance. This aspect of David's character is particularly clear in the series of stories recorded in 1 Samuel 24–26. These chapters exhibit a simple "sandwich" structure. Chapters 24 and 26 record two occasions when David could have easily killed Saul, but refused to do so, preferring to wait for Yahweh's deliverance. Between these accounts 1 Samuel 25 relates the story of the surly and insulting Nabal, whom David would likely have killed had it not been for the intercession of his wife Abigail, who prevails upon David to show mercy and leave vengeance to God. God does in fact strike Nabal dead a mere ten days following his encounter with David.

When David's imprecations are read in the light of his actual behavior toward his enemies the real function of these curses becomes clear. By expressing his anger to God and surrendering his desire for vengeance to Yahweh, David found the freedom to behave mercifully toward his enemies. These heated prayers vented the wrath that might otherwise have manifested itself as physical violence and opened another way for the supplicant to respond to attacks that protected him from "bloodguilt" (1 Sam 25.33).

IMPRECATIONS IN THE LIGHT OF CHRIST'S ATONING WORK

A fascinating feature of the imprecatory psalms is the anonymity of the enemies upon whom these prayers

wish God's severest judgment. Almost never are they identified beyond the generic labels of "the wicked," "the enemies," or "my oppressors." Given the liturgical nature of the Psalms, one could certainly argue that this anonymity serves to give these prayers the broadest possible application such that worshippers can simply supply in their minds whichever enemies are appropriate for the given circumstance. On the other hand, the hesitance of these psalms to identify the enemies may serve a more theological purpose. Perhaps, the specific of identity of these enemies was as yet unrevealed from the psalmists' standpoint.

With the coming of Christ a new light is shed on the cosmic battlefield of the war between good and evil. The New Testament confronts us with new combatants, indeed with a new kind of war fought not against flesh and blood and waged not with the weapons of human warfare (Eph 6.12; 2 Cor 10.3–5). Jesus confronts and expels demons. He disarms the "rulers and authorities" through his crucifixion and he binds the devil and takes him as his prisoner of war (Col 2.15; Mark 3.23–27; Rev 20.2). Is it possible, then, that the imprecatory prayers of the Psalter ultimately find their target in the spiritual enemies of Christ and his church—the devil and his demons, our own sinful nature, and Death?

Though it is currently out of fashion to identify the enemies in the imprecatory psalms with the spiritual forces that Christians are commanded to resist,⁴ the New Testament is suggestive in redirecting our ire toward our own sinful natures, toward Death, and toward the devil (Gal 5.24; 1 Cor 15.26; 1 Pet 5.8). This is not to suggest that the psalmists did not have actual human enemies in mind when they first composed these prayers. Rather, it is to suggest that the psalmists had little to no knowledge of the spiritual forces revealed in the New Testament, and that therefore they naturally directed their desires for retribution on those human agents who manifested injustice and oppression. Christ, however, has revealed the underlying sources of the evil that provoked these imprecations to begin with and has therefore given them a new, more appropriate target.

We return then to our original question. How can these psalms inform Christian prayer without bringing us into opposition to the New Testament commands to "bless and curse not" (Rom 12.4)? The four perspectives we have surveyed suggest that imprecatory prayer helps Christians live up to Jesus' ethic of love and forgiveness in at least three important ways. First, these prayers prevent Christian forgiveness from degenerating into a kind of moral indulgence. Anemic conceptions of forgiveness run the risk of diminishing the severity of sin and of the necessity of its removal from our hearts and from our world. The outrage these prayers express against abuse, oppression and exploitation is a healthy reminder that forgiveness must never be confused with tolerance for or allowance of sin. The cross holds together the tension of divine wrath toward sin and requital of the sinner. Imprecatory prayer in combination with a forgiving spirit can preserve this same necessary tension in believers' minds.

Second, these prayers release our desire for vengeance to God and thus free us to adopt a merciful stance toward our enemies. The venting of rage in the refuge of God's presence is an important prerequisite to any genuine love of enemies. If the Christian does not confront and deal with her legitimate feelings of anger and desire for retribution, any forgiveness or love offered is likely to be sentimental and short-term.

Third, the trajectory of these prayers finds its end point in the Christian's battle against the sinful nature, Death and the spiritual forces that serve as the source of the evil that rightly excites our anger. Since in the light of Christ the church now sees clearly who the real enemies are, she is able to see the human agents of such evil as fellow victims of a common oppressor. Our prayers that God will bring down his judgment on the true sources of evil is as much a prayer for the emancipation of our human enemies as it is a prayer for the ultimate destruction of our true, spiritual foes.

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4. J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 39.