

What to Make of the Cursing? II

In the last chapter of Isaiah, the posture of one who pleases God, upon whom the countenance of God comes with blessing, is commended to us:

“But to this one I will look,
To him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word.”
(Is. 66:2b, emphasis mine; NASB, as all below)

The text we have before us this morning, Ps. 109, should certainly cause us to tremble, and I approach the preaching of it with fear, and possibly not sufficient fear. I pray we approach in humility, in trembling, and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and kept from temptation.

For the choir director. A Psalm of David.

- ¹O God of my praise,
Do not be silent!
- ²For they have opened the wicked and deceitful mouth against me;
They have spoken against me with a lying tongue.
- ³They have also surrounded me with words of hatred,
And fought against me without cause.
- ⁴In return for my love they act as my accusers;
But I am in prayer.
- ⁵Thus they have repaid me evil for good
And hatred for my love.

- ⁶Appoint a wicked man over him,
And let an accuser stand at his right hand.
- ⁷When he is judged, let him come forth guilty,
And let his prayer become sin.
- ⁸Let his days be few;
Let another take his office.
- ⁹Let his children be fatherless
And his wife a widow.
- ¹⁰Let his children wander about and beg;
And let them seek sustenance far from their ruined homes.
- ¹¹Let the creditor seize all that he has,
And let strangers plunder the product of his labor.
- ¹²Let there be none to extend lovingkindness to him,
Nor any to be gracious to his fatherless children.
- ¹³Let his posterity be cut off;
In a following generation let their name be blotted out.

- ¹⁴Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord,
And do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out.

¹⁵ Let them be before the Lord continually,
That He may cut off their memory from the earth;
¹⁶ Because he did not remember to show lovingkindness,
But persecuted the afflicted and needy man,
And the despondent in heart, to put them to death.
¹⁷ He also loved cursing, so it came to him;
And he did not delight in blessing, so it was far from him.
¹⁸ But he clothed himself with cursing as with his garment,
And it entered into his body like water
And like oil into his bones.
¹⁹ Let it be to him as a garment with which he covers himself,
And for a belt with which he constantly girds himself.
²⁰ Let this be the reward of my accusers from the Lord,
And of those who speak evil against my soul.

²¹ But You, O God, the Lord, deal kindly with me for Your name's sake;
Because Your lovingkindness is good, deliver me;
²² For I am afflicted and needy,
And my heart is wounded within me.
²³ I am passing like a shadow when it lengthens;
I am shaken off like the locust.
²⁴ My knees are weak from fasting,
And my flesh has grown lean, without fatness.
²⁵ I also have become a reproach to them;
When they see me, they wag their head.

²⁶ Help me, O Lord my God;
Save me according to Your lovingkindness.
²⁷ And let them know that this is Your hand;
You, Lord, have done it.
²⁸ Let them curse, but You bless;
When they arise, they shall be ashamed,
But Your servant shall be glad.
²⁹ Let my accusers be clothed with dishonor,
And let them cover themselves with their own shame as with a robe.

³⁰ With my mouth I will give thanks abundantly to the Lord;
And in the midst of many I will praise Him.
³¹ For He stands at the right hand of the needy,
To save him from those who judge his soul.

(Ps. 109)

What we have heard is the very word of God, which, like all of Scripture, “is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17) Let us receive it as such, with trembling. [Prayer.]

Introduction.

This psalm is a cry to God from David, who is suffering under slander: wicked and deceitful mouths, filled with lying tongues, speak words of hate and accusation against David, and entrap him. His testimony is that there is no just cause for their opposition; indeed, there is great injustice in it, for David has shown them love and given them good. Words seem to be the main weapons wielded against David to his harm, and though ‘only’ words, they put David in a position of great deprivation: he is poor, needy, and his heart is wounded: affections and will are stricken. He has been fasting either out of devotion or necessity, and it leaves him physically weak and gaunt – and his appearance gives his opponents occasion for further insult. We can think of circumstances that might match the description: before he was king, when he was fleeing before King Saul, who often spoke slanderous words against him, accusing him of treason, and by others in that time when they would tell King Saul where David was to win Saul’s favor; or, when he was king, in the betrayal he experienced at the hands of his son Absalom (who had been subtly accusing David’s courts of being unjust). We have no indication of the exact circumstance, but we have these occasions as possibilities, or pictures of what the circumstance was like. David was in a desperate circumstance, as we have often found him in the psalms we have been reading in the past 5 months (beginning with Ps. 52) – psalms that do directly mention some of these occasions in their titles.

But it is not David’s circumstance, or the slander against him, that disturbs us; it is *his* words in response to this situation that may cause alarm, particularly all the imprecations in verses 6 through 20 (which will be my focus). The world we live in now will regard this text as *hate speech*. In a certain way, we should not concern ourselves with how the world regards it – first and foremost, in light of the settled truth of 2 Timothy 3:16-17, we should be concerned with how *we* regard it. Do *we* think of it as hate speech? Are we embarrassed by the presence of Ps. 109 in Holy Scripture? Would we have preferred it to be absent? Do we feel we have to apologize for it? Do we wish there were some huge textual problems with this Psalm (alas! there doesn’t seem to be) so that we could weasel our way out of its clear meaning? Do we wish it were just obscure, not all that important a psalm, really, something we could hide in a corner? – only to find that there it is, quoted in the first chapter of Acts!

I ask these questions not to accuse anyone, but more to confess to you. Here is one of the ways in which the rubber of *Sola Scriptura* hits the road. If we believe that *all* Scripture is God-breathed, and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and even training in righteousness – well, here it is, a part of ‘all Scripture’, a hard part, and if hard, undoubtedly we need its reproof, correction, its teaching and training; there is profit here – profit hard-won, but profit all the better for it.

On the other hand, we might be tempted to think that wrestling with this psalm is a sign of weakness. ‘Better not admit my perplexity around my solid Reformed friends!’ But who does not encounter this psalm with great difficulty? The worst of sinners (for bad reason) can have no problems with the psalm, and perhaps the greatest of saints can *for good reason* have no problems with it - but I think more likely, only the saints in glory. In case you think you are

alone in perplexity, hear what Charles Haddon Spurgeon had to say about it, from his *Treasury of David*. (I am confident that none of us would think Spurgeon a theological liberal!)

“[It is] by no means easy to imagine the whole nation singing such dreadful imprecations. We ourselves, at any rate, under the gospel dispensation, find it very difficult to infuse into the Psalm a gospel sense, or a sense at all compatible with the Christian spirit; and therefore one would think the Jews must have found it hard to chant such strong language without feeling the spirit of revenge excited; and the arousal of that spirit could never have been the object of divine worship in any period of time—under law or under gospel. At the very outset this title shows that the Psalm has a meaning with which it is fitting for men of God to have fellowship before the throne of the Most High: but what is that meaning? This is a question of no small difficulty, and only a very childlike spirit will ever be able to answer it.

“Unless it can be proved that the religion of the old dispensation was altogether hard, morose, and Draconian, and that David was of a malicious, vindictive spirit, it cannot be conceived that this Psalm contains what one author has ventured to call ‘a pitiless hate, a refined and insatiable malignity.’ To such a suggestion we cannot give place, no, not for an hour. But what else can we make of such strong language? Truly this is one of the hard places of Scripture, a passage which the soul trembles to read; yet as it is a Psalm unto God, and given by inspiration, it is not ours to sit in judgment upon it, but to bow our ear to what God the Lord would speak to us therein.”

I would like to help us this morning in doing that: being humble and contrite and trembling before this psalm, His word. What are we to make of the cursing?

I. Recognize the Prophetic Spirit [title].

The title words of this psalm say that it is a “Psalm of David;” he is the human author, and that tells us a lot. It should lead us to consider two things: what the Scripture says about David’s authorship of so many of the Psalms, and what the character of David was.

First, how does Peter regard David’s words in the early chapters of Acts? From Acts 1:

¹⁵At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said, ¹⁶“Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry.” ²⁰“For it is written in the book of Psalms,

‘Let his homestead be made desolate,
And let no one dwell in it’;

and,

‘Let another man take his office.’

²¹Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us— ²²beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.”

(Acts 1:15-22)

So, Peter says that the Holy Spirit foretold through David, what would take place regarding Judas – in two places in particular, from Ps. 69:25 and from Ps. 109:8, both of David. Peter considers each of these psalms *prophetic* (in the popular sense of the foretelling of events), hence casting David in the role of prophet. Further, in his Pentecost sermon when he quotes from Ps. 16 (again, of David), Peter says this:

³⁰And so, because he [David] *was a prophet* and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, ³¹*he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ*, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay.

(Acts 2:30-31)

So too Peter regards Ps. 110 at the end of the same sermon, as prophetic and related to the ascension of Jesus Christ. This attitude toward the psalms is common to all the disciples, who in chapter 4 of Acts regard Ps. 2 (again, David) as prophetic of those gathered together to crucify the Christ (Acts 4:24-28). Paul shares the same opinion, finding in Ps. 2 and Ps. 16 a promise of the raising of Christ from the dead fulfilled (Acts 13:32-37). I do not need to keep multiplying examples; these are sufficient to show that prophecy is hardly limited to the books we call ‘The Prophets.’ The Psalms contain plenty of prophetic material, much of it from David, thus earning David the title of prophet. So, is David also among the prophets? Most surely, and in a way that King Saul never was! This gives us one reason to consider the cursings of verses 6 through 20 not as human rage, but as God-breathed foretelling.

We should also consider David’s character, and when we do, we see a remarkably non-vengeful spirit in the man. Consider that he was a man of war, whose harpist fingers were then trained for battle, and we find an avoidance of bloodshed you wouldn’t expect to find in a man in his position. His bitter opponent, King Saul, he steadfastly refuses to oppose with force, because he is the Lord’s anointed king till he passes; David himself will simply not raise his hand against him. When David does become king, he has executed one who claims to have killed Saul – he thought David would favor him for that, but he had misjudged David greatly. David wanted it clear: his was not a reign established by assassination. He had to do the same when Ish-bosheth, son of Saul, and rival to the throne, was really assassinated; the non-pretend assassins are executed, in justice, not revenge (revenge would have led David to heap praises on them for doing his work). David again and again has to distance himself from Joab and Abishai, the sons of Zeruah, who first murder Abner in revenge for their brother. Toward the end of kingship, his son Absalom commits treason against him, and he would have spared him but Joab ignores the command of David, and slays him. When returning to Jerusalem, Shimei, the Benjamite who cursed David when Absalom forced his exit from Jerusalem, approaches in real or feigned contrition, Abishai, Joab’s brother, then suggests he be slain, and David rebukes both brothers again. Is David perfect in this? No. But consider what happens when David does move toward revenge (in the insult given by Nabal): the correction of the woman Abigail is sufficient to turn him from that sin – and God deals with Nabal. Given all that, do we think that David, in writing of these verses in this Psalm, is just breathing his native air of hatred? He, who restrains himself so admirably?

Putting these facts together, one comes to the conclusion that these words of imprecation in verses 6 – 20 are not spoken from vengeful passions, but (as Matthew Henry states) from a spirit of prophecy. And this is not an isolated instance in the Scripture. I would think that most of the psalms we call imprecatory (psalms with curses like these) are from David. In all of these cases, this is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Christ, speaking prophetically. Now as soon as I say that, I realize that I may not have solved our difficulty with this text, but rather only made it worse. We might have hoped we could explain these verses away as mere human elements among the divine, dross among the silver, but the Scriptures do not allow us that. But, brethren, I find this the only safe way to proceed and be true to what Scripture says of itself, regarding it as the Word of God, and not merely something that ‘contains’ or ‘carries’ the Word of God. Anyone reading Scripture must discern, and rightly divide, but that is a different thing than judging Scripture to see which parts are ‘right’ and which ones ‘wrong.’

But I actually do think that an honest recognition of the spirit of prophecy here resolves some problems or at least allows us to see just how big the problem is. At a certain point, we simply have to come to grips with the prophetic nature of this psalm and all the psalms that we with cursings (like Ps. 69) – and indeed other psalms that are not imprecatory. Then, we realize that if Psalm 109 troubles us, then the vast majority of the prophetic literature should fall by the same concern. Put another way, if we take the extremity of the curses of Ps. 109 to be the mere vindictiveness of the psalmist, then why not consider the prophets just to be guilty of even more horrific vindictiveness? Take a typical oracle of doom in one of the prophetic books, a pronouncement of judgment against some nation, and see writ large what we find in Ps. 109 – curses pronounced upon whole peoples rather than just on an individual and his family. So, why not accuse the prophets of hatred on an international scale – frustrated Hitlers or Stalins? (Oh - wait, come to think of it, many likely do think of the prophets that way. Never mind.) And if you insist on that, then you must insist that Jesus’ woes upon Jerusalem are in the same category, and at some point one really should realize that all this sort of reasoning just proves way too much, and either give up that line of thinking in repentance or – realize that you are not a Christian. Given the absurd conclusion of this line of reasoning, looking at Ps. 109 as prophetic, and as speaking God’s righteous judgment, seems best. The same will apply to the less troubling examples of cursings.

When I preached on Ps. 137 nearly 8 years ago, in a sermon with the same title, I said that it did not so much give new prophecy as simply remind God’s people of prophecy already given before, and so was neither strictly prophetic nor even imprecatory. We can’t say that for Ps. 109. Here there is clearly cursing, and it is clearly prophecy, and found here in agreement with passages in other psalms. So, when we encounter in the psalms such cursing, let us recognize the prophetic spirit in which they were given.

II. Tremble at the Sinner’s Ruin [v. 6-20].

Having first recognized Ps. 109 as God’s righteous judgment pronounced in a prophetic spirit, we then can proceed to see verses 6 through 20 as God’s settled judgment, rather than a man’s personal grudge. That does not make these verses less horrifying to read – no, it makes it

worse. Because if it were mere human passion laid before us, - well, a man's worst wishes on his enemies may not come true, but God's judgment will surely come to pass. This leads us to next thing I exhort to myself, and to you: to come to these verses, trembling at the sinner's ruin. And when we say 'sinner,' we naturally think of a strict application to Judas. The famous – or infamous – verse in this psalm, verse 8, is directly applied to him. And it may be best to first consider Judas, and fear – but part of that fear should be that there is broader application, that we can discern because it is hard to apply all of this psalm to him alone.

Each time the twelve disciples are listed, Judas is listed and described with words like we heard in Mark 3 this morning: “who betrayed Him [Jesus]”. How would like that as your epitaph? That is his epitaph, not on any stone in the Field of Blood where he hung himself, but in every Bible printed in any language! See there the utter ruin of his heritage – a desolate house! God's judgment upon him is made clear in how he dies; Luke, the physician, spares us no detail:

¹⁸(Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out. ¹⁹And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

(Acts 1:18,19)

I put that before us because Scripture often displays God's judgment upon sinners in bloody deaths – think of the judgment upon Jezebel. The New Testament is not kind to Judas: Jesus himself testifies as follows (found in each of Synoptic gospels):

²¹For the Son of Man is to go just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been good for that man if he had not been born.”

(Mark 14:21)

What a horror it is, to have it said of you that it would have better for you not to have been born! What Job and Jeremiah wrongly wished for themselves would have rightly been wished for by Judas! But alas for Judas, in God's sovereignty, this was not to be. It is in the Gospel of John that we find so much written against Judas, much of it from Jesus himself. “Did I Myself not choose you, the twelve, yet one of you is a devil?” (John 6:70) – which John goes on to make clear refer to Judas, *the son of Simon Iscariot*. Then:

¹⁰. . and you are clean, but not all of you. ¹¹For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, “Not all of you are clean.”

(John 13:10-11)

Jesus is recorded as quoting Ps 41:9 (again, of David) as applying to Judas:

¹⁷If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. ¹⁸I do not speak of all of you. I know the ones I have chosen; but it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats My bread has lifted up his heel against Me.’

(John 13:17-18)

In the high priestly prayer, Jesus refers to Judas as the son of perdition – one who is predestined to eternal punishment (John 17:12). Judas is revealed as a petty thief in John’s gospel, and the main and hypocritical complainer about the anointing of Jesus, and is revealed in all as betraying the Christ for pay. Both Luke and John give testimony to Satan’s possession of Judas – that Satan entered into Judas.

Nowhere in the New Testament can one find any basis for hope for Judas in eternity. Yes, Matthew records Jesus calling Judas ‘friend’ at the moment of betrayal, but this so-called friend is ‘the son of perdition.’ Better for him not to have been born settles the case. Not that I put the curses of verses 6 – 20 in Jesus’ mouth at that time – there is no need to, when it was put into David’s pen centuries earlier. See his ruin! ‘Appoint a wicked man over him, and let an accuser stand at his right hand.’ Accuser could be translated ‘Satan,’ as it is in the King James. See Satan ‘over him’, indeed having entered into him. See him stand at his right hand, and say, “You’ve betrayed innocent blood.” He accuses, and rightly in the facts, but not toward the saving, but for the ruin of Judas – the coins are cast back, and he hangs himself. He cannot avail himself of grace; he cannot imagine forgiveness for betrayal of the innocent Son of Man. See the ruin of his family – we don’t know whether he had children who would be fatherless and beg, or a wife to be a widow – but he did have a father, and his name is recorded in the Gospel of John, as we’ve heard. And that too is in every Bible ever printed; that’s his epitaph: the father of Judas, who betrayed Jesus.

Seeing this ruin of a man and even his relatives, should horrify us. We should tremble. But we should also see that it is not limited to him. He stands in the place of all who oppose Christ. The verse from Ps. 69 which Peter applies to Judas, our Lord applies to the nation of Israel which, as a nation, disowned their Lord:

³⁴O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it! ³⁵Behold, your house is left to you desolate; and I say to you, you will not see Me until the time comes when you say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’”

(Luke 13:34,35)

When that Palm Sunday does come, after the triumphal entry, this -

⁴¹When He approached Jerusalem, He saw the city and wept over it, ⁴²saying, “If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes. ⁴³For the days will come upon you when your enemies will throw up a barricade against you, and surround you and hem you in on every side, ⁴⁴and they will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation.”

This comes to pass in 70 A.D., the ruin of Jerusalem, not one stone left upon another; see just how desolate a house can be.

One can multiply examples of this in the Old Testament, particularly in the history of the Kings, and especially in the Northern Kingdom, with succession after succession of wicked

dynasties. An assassination takes place, and another takes his office – and, by the way, that is not for the betterment of the nation. One wicked man replaces another, and things go from bad to worse. Bear that in mind when you are tempted to think any change would be for the better. Wrong. Time prevents me from giving these examples. The point to see in these is that we see God’s justice on display before us, which should cause us to tremble. The words in Psalm 109 against the children, and then against the parents, which can seem so obscenely vindictive to us when regarded as the ravings of a malicious man, are actually clearly stated elsewhere as how God deals with man in His justice. Sin is punished to the third, fourth generation – so the law. The proverbs have much to say about how a foolish son ruins the father and mother. Do you see that if we regard as vindictive these verses in Ps. 109, then you might as well regard any language of dire consequence as vindictive. Imagine this exchange with a man who is about to do to jump from a building:

Man inside building, leaning out window: “If you jump off that ledge, you’ll die a horrible, gruesome death on the pavement below!”

Man on ledge: “How viciously vindictive of you! What hatred you show me!”

This is patently absurd, but our culture is quickly moving in this direction, especially with regard to life and sexual ethics. The Christian lovingly warns, and it is taken as hate speech. As a culture, we have the knife at our wrists, but woe unto him that warns of the consequences of a sharp movement.

We dare not place these cursings safely against Judas only, or even against the ancient nation of Israel, distant in history. Nor dare we place these cursings only against those nations ruined by following evil leaders, as in how ruined Germany was after WWII. This is the ruin of all sinners put before us, and as such should cause us to fear. And it is not the sinner’s ruin even in full display, for it really only puts before us the temporal consequences. It is from the mouth of our Lord that we hear the most of eternal punishment in hell, where fire is not quenched, and where worm does not die. It is from Our Lord that we are warned against being cast into outer darkness. Sinner, if you are not reconciled to Christ, may you see the ruin put before you, and flee to the only safe refuge, the only place of lovingkindness. Tremble at the sinner’s ruin, and flee!

III. Avail Yourself of Grace [v. 6-20].

There is grace for the repentant sinner, a gracious sparing from such ruin, and grace indeed in the working of such repentance in the heart. Those in Christ already, though, are also called to avail themselves of grace in the trials they find themselves in this psalm. How do we see that? Let us just look at the first verse:

¹O God of my praise,
Do not be silent!

(Ps. 109:1)

Here we see praise and prayer. Praise appears even more fully at the end of the psalm, in anticipation of his deliverance:

³⁰ With my mouth I will give thanks abundantly to the Lord;
And in the midst of many I will praise Him.

³¹ For He stands at the right hand of the needy,
To save him from those who judge his soul.

(Ps. 109:30,31)

Thanksgiving for salvation, anticipated – but God was already the God of his praise, and that, no doubt, for past deliverances. And that should not leave the Christian heart unmoved. We should not be able to read the cursings of Psalm 109 without realized that apart from God’s grace, that would be our end as well. We should see in these cursings types of all that we are spared from. Were it not for God’s grace, we would be like the chaff that the wind drives away. We would not stand in the assembly of the righteous. Thus reading these words reminds us of what we are spared from, by God’s grace. And then we turn to see what we are delivered to, gathered in the midst of many in the heavenly places, praising Him, our God, beholding the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, a lamb looking as if it had been slain, and we think not only of what we are spared from but what blessing we are delivered to! Think nothing of deserving this! It is God’s graciousness, full and free.

In the here and now, we look at the petitions of this psalm and see how we may pray in times of distress and persecution. I think one of the reasons these psalms (and so many we’ve read over the past several months as we read through the psalms in order) – one of the reasons why these psalms seem so foreign to us is that we are not suffering for the name of Christ. David’s afflictions are a gracious provision to the persecuted church. But that is rapidly coming upon us here in this country, and already has come upon brothers in Christ who have jobs we would have thought safe: bakers, photographers, called to call sacred what is profane. Doctors, nurses, called to do things which mere decades ago were clearly against the Hippocratic Oath. The time is coming, and now is, and probably has been for some time, when to be a doctor will mean you have to be willing to kill an unborn child. And not to be willing will be cast as hateful. Yes, to refuse to be a murderer is called hateful. We can love by warning or by deed, and it will be returned to us, as it was to David, in accusation. Lying and deceitful tongues will be set on fire against the Christian. We can do good, and evil will be repaid. In the midst of this, we can pray:

²⁶ Help me, O Lord my God;
Save me according to Your lovingkindness.

²⁷ And let them know that this is Your hand;
You, Lord, have done it.

²⁸ Let them curse, but You bless;
When they arise, they shall be ashamed,
But Your servant shall be glad.

²⁹ Let my accusers be clothed with dishonor,
And let them cover themselves with their own shame as with a robe.

(Ps. 109:26-29)

The question that then is no doubt in your minds is this: should we pray verses 6 – 20 against those who oppose us? This is no small question, and I tremble at the need to give an answer to it. First, we need to pray for repentance on the part of our enemies, rather than ruin; it is the kindest good that we can pray for them, for it would yield them good for eternity. And this psalm does not oppose this. The cursings are here made, as one commentator said, *on the assumption of impenitence*. Assuming this man will not repent, this is what will happen. And that is common to many prophetic denunciations (certainly not all). Think of Jonah: “Yet 40 days, and Nineveh will be overthrown.” No entreaties to repentance, just bare judgment is pronounced. But, when heard, the grace of repentance was given, and God’s hand was stayed, and it did not come to pass. *And Jonah understood that*; he knew that the bare pronouncement of judgment contained in it a hidden appeal to the sinner, to repent. That was why he had fled to Tarshish, because he didn’t want that kindness shown to those of Nineveh. Jonah understood that the pronouncement of doom was a kindness to those who would receive it with trembling, and repent. So too with these cursings in the psalms, and with these most horrible cursings found here in Psalm 109. These are the curses that fall upon you unless you repent.

But failing repentance, should we not pray for God’s justice to be done? Should not our wills be aligned with those of our Lord, whose word promises such ruin? Take an extreme case: faced with a Hitler, or faced with a Stalin, should we not pray that (barring repentance) another take his office? Here we must proceed with trembling, because the tempter is at our side, to make our vengeful hatred seem holy to us, and tempt us to appropriate God’s Holy word and put it at the use of our hatred. We know that he can quote Scripture to his purposes, and we know that the heart is above all things deceptive, and that we will only in heaven be safe from the temptation to sanctify our burning hatreds, as we will there be safe from all sins. We can certainly recognize gross abuses of this Scripture in others. Calvin reports that it was common in his time for Franciscan friars to hire themselves out to those who desired to curse someone, and that Ps. 109 was the Scripture of choice. That is sacrilege, pure and simple – so Calvin called it, Matthew Henry repeats that judgment, and so should we. And it would backfire terribly: Calvin reports of one woman in France who so hired the friars against her only son. And then we remember verse 14:

¹⁴ Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord,
And do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out.

(Ps. 109:14; emphasis mine)

This would be comic were it not so tragic. But we are not immune from this. The infamy of verse 8 comes from its frequent use against Presidents we don’t like – or, even more frankly, against Presidents whose ways are ungodly. I heard it first used against Clinton, but apparently during Obama’s first term, it was printed on tee shirts to “pray for our President (Ps. 109:8).” We may find that funny, we may even find it just, but it backfires as terribly as the other case, and someone made money off it as surely as the friars did in Calvin’s time. If we have churches that are Biblically illiterate, we surely have a culture that is even more so. They refer to Scripture references (p s dot one zero nine colon eight) as “code” (so I heard it called on NPR), and someone eventually is able to find a Bible, cracks that code, and finds what it says. And then looks at the verses around it, and sees what a godless person can only see: not a humble

reliance on the God of recompense (He doesn't exist for that person), but the arming of an assassin. If we have trouble seeing humble reliance on the God of recompense in this psalm, would we expect the world to see it? A psalm as troubling as it is to a man of such faith and confidence in the Scripture as Spurgeon, and we go and use it as a tee-shirt slogan, and then act surprised when the world reacts sharply against us? Is it wisdom that we do these things? Do not suppose me here to be supporting our current president and his policies. But in our praying for repentance and for God's undeserved mercy upon our nation, we should pray not only for the halls of the kings first but even more in the hearts of majority who vote – more need of that than thinking how we can use Bible verses to sell tee shirts that the world will misunderstand. (The world will misunderstand even if we are clear. We need not to multiply opportunities foolishly.) We need also to look and see that these verses as Peter interpreted to them were not aimed against a Herod, a Pilate, or even a Caesar – but against an apostate disciple. If these verses should be aimed against any, it would be against church leaders who are apostate, who do not believe the word of God, deny Christ, and muddle to the world what the Church thinks. Note that it is for those who come with another gospel that Paul gives anathemas, not against Caesar.

Have I avoided the question? Can we, should we, pray these verses? Can we sing them without sinning? Surely, for it is God's word – but only with a great, great care that we are not merely exercising our vengeance with His word, but resting in the God of recompenses as surely as David did. We must find hateful what the Lord finds hateful, and recognize that even there, we may be tempted. Remember this case, found toward the end of Luke 9:

⁵¹When the days were approaching for His ascension, He was determined to go to Jerusalem; ⁵²and He sent messengers on ahead of Him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for Him. ⁵³But they did not receive Him, because He was traveling toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴When His disciples James and John saw this, they said, "Lord, do You want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?" ⁵⁵But He turned and rebuked them, [and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; ⁵⁶for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."] And they went on to another village.

(Luke 9:51-56)

Here is a case we would have thought open and shut: they've not received Jesus. And Jesus says to the sons of thunder, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of." Let us be so warned.

I hope that I have opened this hard psalm to us in some measure, and in faithfulness to God's word. I pray we would recognize the spirit of prophecy when we encounter it in these psalms. I pray that we would see and tremble at the sinner's ruin, to warn those not yet turned to Christ, and to avail ourselves of grace afresh – in thankfulness for the ruin we been spared from, and paradise we are delivered to, and in knowing that we can come before the throne of grace in our time of distress, relying upon the God who can turn the heart of a Saul into an Apostle Paul, or who will be the God of recompense for those whose hearts are not turned.

Preached with trembling, June 8, 2014