

Thursday Morning Bible Study:

Unexpected Psalms: Do We Ever Sing Like That?

Hymns:

71 – Is It Nothing To You, All You Who Pass By?

84 – Jesus Lives! Thy Terrors Now Can, O Death, No More Enthrall Us!

3. Psalms of Protest and Imprecation

This study probably deals with some of the most surprising, even shocking, of the psalms – those psalms that protest against God’s seeming failures and that call down judgment and curse on enemies. In some versions of the psalter in Anglican prayerbooks, portions of these psalms are bracketed to indicate that they may be omitted in recitation in worship. Perhaps we don’t do that in print, but maybe in our own reading we neatly skip past these difficult psalms. Just how do we think about the matters of protest and imprecation?

For a classic example of a protest psalm, look at **Psalm 10**, a psalm of David.

The protest is stated very plainly in the opening verse: ‘Why, O LORD, do you stand afar off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?’

Then follows (vv. 2-11) the cause of the protest. The wicked do what they want with the poor; they do whatever they like, with no regard to God at all. What is particularly offensive is that for all this, they seem to prosper and do well. They say, ‘God has forgotten, he has hidden his face, he will never see it.’ And in v. 1 David is saying that it seems that the wicked are right – that God is unengaged with this situation – standing far off, withdrawing and inactive.

Remember how we saw that Psalms 1 and 2 are the ‘gateway’ or interpretive key to the psalms. Psalm 1 spoke of the blessedness of the righteous and the judgment that faces the wicked. The righteous prospers in all that he does (v.3), but the wicked are not so – they will not stand in the the judgment, or take a seat in the congregation of the righteous (v. 5). Psalm 10 is really a protest that what is said in Psalm 1 does not seem to be working out, as the righteous flounder while the wicked flourish.

In vv. 12-15 David calls on God to rouse Himself and act. Will God really let the wicked get away with their assumption that God will never call them to account? The basis for this call is a truth that David knows against all the evidence and all the assumptions of the wicked. V. 14a – ‘But you *do* see, for you note mischief and vexation, *that you may take it into your hands.*’ And this is the reason why the helpless can call on and trust in God (v. 14b.) And so, v. 15, David calls on the faithful God to bring his judgment on the wicked – to break their arm (that is, bring them down from their powerful position) and to call them to account. (This is a note of imprecation in this psalm – protest and imprecation belong together.)

The psalm ends (vv. 16-18) with an affirmation of God’s final justice – and this carries echoes of Psalm 2 to it. God will arise and act; his enemies will be routed and be unable to wreak terror anymore; and the afflicted will be heard and helped. This affirmation is in fact a taunt in the face of the wicked. In effect David says, ‘Your days are numbered. God will bring you down. Your defeat is on its way.’

I think that Psalm **137** may stand out to us as one of the more severe of the imprecatory psalms.

The psalm begins as a lament (vv. 1-4). Israel finds herself bereft after the severe judgment of the exile to Babylon. God's people are so bereft that they cannot sing, even when their tyrannical tormentors taunt them and ask for a happy ditty. To try to sing the songs of Zion (those psalms which extol the favour of the Lord on Jerusalem (e.g. Psalm 122) was to try to sing with a mouth full of concrete.

This lament turns to resolution (vv. 5-6). Despite the awful situation in which they find themselves, God's people determine that they will not forget Jerusalem, and will hold Jerusalem dear, even when they have lived through Jerusalem's destruction. This resolution or determination is that of faith and hope (Hebrews 11:1 – the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen).

And so the imprecations (vv. 7-9) are grounded in the faith and hope that finally the situation will be turned around. The prayer is that those who have wreaked havoc and destroyed beautiful Jerusalem with not an ounce of mercy – the Edomites in league with the Babylonians – will be remembered by the LORD for judgment. There is even the visceral cry that they receive from the LORD what they have wreaked on God's people. The awfulness of pregnant women being ripped open and their children being bashed to death on the rocks is horrendous – it *is* what happened in Israel's history more than once. Hosea 13:16 speaks of Samaria (the northern kingdom) doing this – and this probably refers to the wicked acts of godless Shallum, the king of Samaria (see 2Kings 15:16) , and Amos 1:13 speaks of the Ammonites doing the same in Gilead, the Israelite territory across the Jordan.

The psalms of imprecation have much in common with the taunt. It is prophetic taunting, speaking of a justice that is yet to come but that will certainly come. In this regard then, the psalms of protest and imprecation are in close connection with Psalm 2, where the rule and kingship of the LORD and His Anointed are so roundly praised.

Psalm 109 also stands out among the imprecatory psalms. It begins (vv. 1-5) with David's plea for help in the face of the treatment he is receiving from the wicked. He calls on God (v. 6) to set against them men who treat them just as they have treated him. And then he goes on to call on God to judge severely (vv. 7-20.) And then in vv. 21-25 he speaks of just how this wrong has impacted him, and in vv. 25-29 he calls again for God's help in judging his enemies. He ends his psalm with a confident affirmation that he will be able to praise God for His help; he trusts that God will answer his plea.

Well, what do we make of all this? I hope that the following points may help us not turn away from these things in embarrassment that they are in Scripture.

In **John 15:25** and **2:17** Jesus and his disciples interpret events in Jesus' ministry with verses from an imprecatory psalm (**Psalm 69:4, 9**). Psalm 69 is a call on God to save David from a desperate situation, and for justice to be done against those who attack him. He pleads his innocence (vv. 6-12), although that is not a plea of complete innocence – v. 5. The psalms of imprecation then, at the very least, open to us something of the suffering of the Righteous One. What we see in these psalms is that there is very great wickedness done in this world. Scripture teaches that all of the great wickedness comes from the devil, who is implacably opposed to God. In the cross of Jesus, all sin, evil and wickedness raised itself to its highest point in crucifying the Lord of glory.

These psalms do really say that evil is evil, and, with the psalms of protest, affirm that in a universe reigned over by the LORD, it must not go unrequited. We live in a world shaped by an ‘openness’ to all things that does not fit with the justice of God. Albert Camus, the atheist existentialist lamented the church saying that it failed to love the damned (as opposed to the atheist existentialists!)¹ And the post-modernist philosopher, Jacques Derrida believed in a complete hospitality that insists on forgoing all judging, condemnation and penalizing, an openness to any future that may be, even a hospitality to the devil should he come knocking on our door.² The psalms of imprecation and protest tell us that in fact this is not the case.

Perhaps some of the prayers and songs in the Revelation come closest in the New Testament to these psalms of protest and imprecation. In **Rev. 6:9-11**, as the fifth seal is opened, all those who have been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne cry out with a loud voice: ‘Sovereign Lord, holy and true, *how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?*’ The answer of the Lord is to give them a white robe – indicating vindication – and the exhortation to rest a little longer for there are more yet to join them, brothers and sisters killed as they have been! The Revelation is filled with descriptions of the way in which the wrath of God is actively revealed on the earth, in human history, and then in its concluding fullness at the end. In **Revelation 14**, which begins with a vision of the redeemed of mankind, contains the vision of three messenger angels. The second of these angels (**14:8**) proclaims and celebrates the fall of Babylon the great and the third (**14:9-11**) announces the coming judgment of all those who throw their lot in with the beast. They will drink the wine of God’s wrath poured out in full strength, be tormented with fire and sulphur *in the presence of the holy angels and the Lamb*, and who face an endless torment with no respite. And all this is told us to encourage us to endure, to keep the commandments of God and faith in Jesus (**14:12**.) This is not the encouragement of terror at ‘what might be befall us’ but rather the encouragement of final vindication. And then in **19:1b-3** there is the song of triumph over all evil that precedes the rejoicing of the coming wedding of the Lamb and his Bride:

‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are just and true! For he has judge the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality, and has avenged on her the blood of her servants.’ Once more they cried out, ‘Hallelujah! The smoke from her goes up forever and ever.’

All this is in the context of time being given to mankind to discover the mercy and grace of God in the cross of His Son. Whatever imprecations there are in the psalms, whatever judgments may be imagined or desired on evil, there is nothing that can fully express the reality of the cross. Jesus, entering into the judgment of the world at the cross, prayed that God would forgive for they don’t know what they are doing. His prayer for forgiveness was not contrary to judgment – it was the heart of the judgment he was entering. In the message of the gospel we have heard that God the Father made Christ, who knew no sin, to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God. This is the message we are called to proclaim. At the end, this will be the final criterion of judgment. How tragic, but also how true and good, that all who did not kiss the Son, not as Judas did in betrayal, but in repentance and faith, will hear those awful words, ‘Depart from me...’ And how glorious that in His grace received by repentance and faith, we have the Father’s word of welcome.

¹ My paraphrase of a comment quoted by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age*.

² See Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2004; p. 30