

Can I Pray Like That?

3-Year Bible Reading Plan

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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to a very easy place to find, the book of Psalms right in the middle, chapter 140. Now there may be some of you here today whether in person or online who are with us for the very first time and I want to invite you to join the journey. In fact, for about two years now, we as a family of faith, we have been walking through the Scriptures, walking through the Bible typically one maybe two chapters a day and we're just gonna go through this for about a three year time period. Now some of you who are brand new to us or maybe you've come somewhat lately maybe thinking, "Well, I've missed out on 2/3 of it," what did we just hear? What did we just pray? "Give us this day our daily bread," not what we missed out yesterday, last week, last month, and so join us in the journey as this week we finish up what we know as the book of Psalms and begin to roll into the wisdom literature of Proverbs.

Well, today as we turn to Psalm 140, I think we would all agree as we have continued to traverse this global pandemic that it has done many a things in our culture but one of the things it has done, it has found a way to even make us more polarized than we were before. In other words, whatever position that one held, they are more staunch in that position today than they were some four months ago, and those that were in opposition to each other have tended to, shall we say, increased the volume, so to speak, and it seems like that everybody is upset with everybody and everybody's calling out everybody. In fact, I was teasing some folks this week that everybody's upset with everybody so much that I want to create a t-shirt that says, "I'm offended that you're not offended." Please note the sarcasm in there, it's my spiritual gift. But we hear the volume being raised, we see the positions even becoming more firm, and yet as we come to Psalm 140, there are many of voices who face opposition and who are contrary to we, the body of Christ, we, the people of Jesus Christ, we, the church of Jesus Christ. And I don't know about you, but there are days where sometimes I just get fed up. There are days where I've had enough, I've just got to defrag, I've got to turn it off, and I've got to unplug because I don't know if it's you or just me, but it seems like that if anybody's gonna get blamed, they're gonna blame the Christians, right? I mean, that's just kind of the way things are going today, and so today as we turn to Psalm 140, we're gonna ask a very important question: can we pray like that? You see, the first eight verses of this Psalm are setting the course for people who speak against the Lord, whose ways are contrary to his word, and when we get to verse 9, there's going to be a three verse prayer that is offered and you're gonna

want to lick your lips and get the chompers out, folks, because you're gonna ask yourself, "Can I really do that?" Well, that's a question we'll answer today.

Beginning in verse 1 of Psalm 140, it says,

1 Deliver me, O LORD, from the evil man: preserve me from the violent man; 2 Which imagine mischiefs in their heart; continually are they gathered together for war. 3 They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders' poison is under their lips. Selah. 4 Keep me, O LORD, from the hands of the wicked; preserve me from the violent man; who have purposed to overthrow my goings. 5 The proud have hid a snare for me, and cords; they have spread a net by the wayside; they have set gins for me. Selah. 6 I said unto the LORD, Thou art my God: hear the voice of my supplications, O LORD. 7 O GOD the Lord, the strength of my salvation, thou hast covered my head in the day of battle. 8 Grant not, O LORD, the desires of the wicked: further not his wicked device; lest they exalt themselves. Selah.

The case has been made. Now listen to verse 9,

9 As for the head of those that compass me about, let the mischief of their own lips cover them. 10 Let burning coals fall upon them: let them be cast into the fire; into deep pits, that they rise not up again. 11 Let not an evil speaker be established in the earth: evil shall hunt the violent man to overthrow him. 12 I know that the LORD will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and the right of the poor. 13 Surely the righteous shall give thanks unto thy name: the upright shall dwell in thy presence.

Now you may not have realized it but what we have just read together formally is called an imprecatory prayer. I know that's one of those big theological words but by sheer definition if we're gonna be particular today, it is a prayer that calls down the wrath of God. It is a prayer that calls down the judgment of God. It is a prayer that in some cases even calls down the curses of God upon those who have rejected him and rebelled against him. If we were to be formal this morning, we would ask ourselves can we pray an imprecatory prayer? If we're gonna be Southern this morning, we ask ourselves, "God, can I pray get 'em?" Because that's essentially what Psalm 140 is, the wicked have compassed them, they're speaking with their words, they're acting out with their actions, and here the people of God are crying out to God, "It's about time, God. When are you going to pour your wrath on them?" Can you imagine praying, "God, I want you to send coals and fire and brimstone from above, send them to the lake of fire and never let them out." Phew, that's strong language and so today we're gonna address this, can we do this, and, you know, particularly speaking, it is by definition a prayer of judgment, a prayer of wrath.

This may be more prominent in the Bible than we give it credit for. You know, today, at least in the last generation, we've become an overly positive faith. What I mean by that is

we don't want to address the negative that's in the Scripture, we always want to talk about the positive. Let me give you an example. You do so here but in a lot of places you never hear a sermon on hell, yet Jesus talked about it twice as much as he did heaven, and when we talk about a prayer such as this for God's wrath and judgment to be poured out, you may think, "Well, I read it today but I don't remember reading something like that." Well, if you've been walking through our Bible reading plan, out of 150 of the Psalms, 14 of them contain one of these imprecatory prayers. Almost 10% of them have a portion where God's judgment and wrath is being called out on those who've encompassed themselves not only against the things of God but more importantly for you and I, against the people of God.

It is not only prominent in the book of Psalms but you might be surprised that it's actually prominent in the life and the ministry of Jesus Christ. In fact, let's begin at the beginning of his ministry, John 2. Jesus comes in to the Temple Mount, this is the earliest days of his public ministry. He's turned the water into wine. What does he do when he turns on that Temple Mount? He takes the tables, he overthrows them. He takes a cord of leather and he begins to whip the floor. He sets the doves free and he sends the merchants out. Can we just all agree that he's not a real happy camper at this moment? In fact, he declares, "You've made my Father's house a den of thieves." What's interesting there is in John 2 it says, "And thus it was fulfilled that the zeal of thine filled thy house." It's a quotation from Psalm 69. Now this is important because Psalm 69 is one of those imprecatory, go get 'em prayers that we have in Psalms, and what does the Scripture testify? That Jesus' ministry – this is important for today's message – Jesus' ministry was partially a fulfillment of the prayers of judgment that we find even throughout the book of Psalms.

Now that's the beginning of his ministry, let's go toward the end. John 15, he is literally the night before his crucifixion. He's washed the disciples' feet. He's talked to them about the power of the Holy Spirit that's gonna come upon them and within them. When you get to chapter 15, it begins by, "I am the vine, you are the branches. You can do nothing apart from me." Wonderful verses that hopefully many of us have memorized and taken to heart. But by the time you get to the end of chapter 15, he's looking to not just the next days but to the next hours where he talks about that he will be encompassed by people, that he will be taken what we know to an illegal trial and crucified on Mount Calvary. And what does it say? Again the things he spoke were written in Psalm 69.

So I find it interesting that right after his first public display of ministry and right after his last private display of ministry Psalm 69, this imprecatory, go get 'em prayer is referenced in Scripture, and we see Jesus Christ as the one who is the implementer of these prayers of wrath and judgment on those who oppose the things of God. I know that before today, you may have never heard the phrase imprecatory, you may have never come across a portion in the Bible where somebody prays God's wrath on somebody else and so let's just kind of walk through this in Psalm 140 and just address it from a variety of angles.

The first one is this: what is it not? You know, at least in my life, some of the ways that I understand something best is to figure out what it is not and so let's address what these type or prayers in the Bible are as we apply them to our own life. What is it not? Let's talk about its purpose. An imprecatory or a wrath calling down prayer is not, its purpose is not revenge. You know, one of the things that I've had to remind myself and remind it to each and every one of you as we walk through this global pandemic, that as a child of God we do not have the right or the privilege to revenge. That's not something God has given us permission to do. In fact, in the book of Deuteronomy 32 and quoted later in the New Testament in the book of Romans it says, "Revenge is mine saith the Lord." And so when you read what happens in the first eight verses, the wicked have encompassed, they're speaking ill of them, naturally it would well up within your flesh some anxiety, some anger, some angst, but this is not a prayer of revenge. In other words, we do not see that you and I have the right to "revenge people" using God's power at our disposal. You and I are not the proverbial tail that gets to wag the dog.

So what we discover in Psalm 140 is that this is not a prayer of revenge but it has an interesting perspective. Look in verse 2, it says that these enemies, they imagine mischiefs in their heart, continually are they gathered together for war. This is important to understand. Prayer such as what we've just read are not reactionary. Now today we live in a world of reaction, do we not? In fact, how many times have you sent an email in the heat of battle and as soon as you push "enter, went, "Uh-oh, that's not gonna do well"? How many times have you said, "I wish I could get that text message back"? And some of you I wish would erase your social media posts, but that's a whole other sermon for another day. But reactionary, what happens because people say things and they do things and they begin to swell up within us this desire to just react? Can I give all of us some wonderful advice? When somebody upsets you, when somebody angers you, when somebody posts something you don't like, you don't have to respond within two minutes. Sit back. Think about it. You know, sometimes as we walk through Proverbs it's actually better to not speak than to say what you should not speak. As I learned early as a child, the Lord gave us two ears and one mouth for a reason. Do the math.

So what we discover is this is not reactionary. What does it say there in verse 2? They continually are doing this. You'll never see one of these type of prayers in the Bible after the first time the Philistines do something. The first time somebody does something they shouldn't do, what you discover is the rebellion has been taking place over an incredible time frame and we discover that sometimes it's multi-generational, there's centuries of rebellion. In fact, it reminds me in Revelation 6 there are these martyrs that are pictured around the throne of God and there's all kinds of havoc taking place on earth during that period the Bible calls the Great Tribulation, and I love what these martyrs say, "God, how much longer until you avenge our death?" Even these martyrs for the faith are like, "Come on, God, get 'em!" A reaction. No, the Lord is responding and here's why this is critical: the Lord never pours his wrath in judgment out on somebody who he has not given the opportunity to understand, confess and repent of their rebellion. He gives them ample opportunity. He gives them multiple opportunities and some of these groups in the Old Testament, he gave them centuries to turn.

But there's a pattern, there is a pattern that takes place and you'll notice here in the first eight verses the wicked, the enemies. If you were to take just an overview of the Old Testament, there are a lot of names such as the Philistines, the Moabites, the Jebusites, and there's a bunch of ites out there, the majority of which find themselves contrary to the ways of God, the will of God, the word of God, as well as the people of God, and one of the things I want you to understand is and I'm gonna use a word that is an emotionally-based hot-button word that gets everybody on edge today. So if you're one of those who are starting to nod off, I'm about to wake you up. Are you ready? A wrath-based, imprecatory, go get 'em God prayer is not racist. You say, "What do you mean it's not racist?" Well, racism is when you're against somebody just because of who they are, just because they're a Philistine, just because they're a Jebusite, that where they were born or their background, their heritage, whatever it may be, you're opposed to them simply because of who they are.

You say, "Jeff, why do you bring that up?" Because we begin to think that as you walk through these prayers in the Bible, it's all about them and not about Israel. It's all about everybody else but not these folks. Did you know in the book of Deuteronomy 27 and 28, there is an individual who prays to God an imprecatory, wrath-based prayer on behalf of the Israelites. In other words, "Our own people are rebelling against you, God. Pour out your wrath." And this is why it is so critical, what we understand as we transition to what it is, that these prayers for God's wrath to be poured out, it's not about them and us, it's about those who rebel and who live lives contrary to the way, the will, and the word of God no matter what their background is, and even those guys who claim, "Well, our father is Jacob and Isaac and Abraham." Remember Jesus in John 8? He said, "I don't care what your lineage is, I don't care what your heritage is, you are disobeying the way, the will, and the word of God."

So that's what it's not. So what is it? What are these prayers, and then as we transition, is it even for us? Let's talk about their purpose. An imprecatory wrath-based prayer is never about an individual, it's always about the group. What is it? Its purpose is to call out in prayer those as a collective group who are in opposition to the things of God. Notice how many times we read the wicked men, their doings, their words. It's plural. There's a multitude of individuals that are involved. You say, "Why is that important?" Because in just a moment we're gonna ask ourselves is this for us, is this something that we can participate in, and our natural tendency is to single out that person who did us wrong. Our natural tendency is, "But God, this individual, this person, can you believe they treated me this way?" Not one single time in all of the Bible, you can read it frontwards, backwards, upside down in any language you want, you will never find a prayer for God to pour his wrath out on an individual for their specific rebellion, it is always a group.

Now this is very strategic and this is important because as we begin to walk through this idea of praying in a like manner, I mean, after all, almost 10% of the Psalms are like this, we need to get away from the idea that whoever "did us wrong," we can call down fire from heaven and just take care of business. But I want you to see the perspective of what it is. I want you to go to the end of verse 3, the end of verse 5, and the end of verse 8. Look at the very last word: Selah. Now some of you were with us a couple of Sunday

nights ago, we did an entire Bible study on this one single word, and I understand and rightfully so, that it is used in a sense that is musical, that its musical definition is to take a break, to pause, to breathe in so as to further what one is doing, and I understand that. However what we know as this word Selah which can mean to take a break, is not used in all of the Psalms and some of these are greatly, can you imagine singing some of these Psalms without breathing one single time. In fact, in the book of Habakkuk 3 this word is used and it's not even a song.

Now why is that important? Yes, it has a definition of, yes, it has an understanding of a musical pause but that's not its exclusive definition. In fact, we discover that geographically there is actually a location in the Middle East known as Selah which, by the way, just happens to be right in the midst of that famous place that we call the Valley of Armageddon. Why is that so important? Three times in the eight verses of declaring that which they had done wrong not only to God but to his people, this word is used. When we look at these imprecatory prayers, when we look at these prayers of wrath, we must understand that its perspective is that of what we know as the Second Coming. Now if you go back into the days of David, you go back into the Old Testament, I understand historically the Philistines were on the other side of the river, the Jebusites were right around the corner, and they did call on God to destroy them, but let me ask you a question: what we just read in verse 10 about sending them into the fire to never get out, did that ever take place on the battlefields of the Middle East? No. In fact, what we're seeing here is these are prophetic, these are projections of how God – listen – ultimately finally when he appears in the air will display and pour out his wrath – listen – on all peoples, you guessed it, all groups who have been in opposition to him, opposed to him, and rebellious to him no matter what year, what place they find themselves. So every time we see one of these prayers of God's judgment, it always invokes the language of and the understanding of what we know as the Second Coming.

Now when you get to the end of your Bible, you get to the book of Revelation, it's pretty wrathful, is it not? In fact, there's an old bumper sticker that says "Jesus is coming back and, boy, is he mad" and that's what you see in Revelation 20. I mean, when he splits the skies wide open, that famous battle of Armageddon, it says that the blood is to the horse of the bridle. It is a bloody battle against those, you guessed it, who have collected themselves as a singular group in complete opposition to the things of God.

But there is a pattern. I want you to go down to verse 10, "Let burning coals fall upon them. Let them be cast into the fire, into deep pits that they rise not up again." This may be the most important aspect about what these prayers are. Yes, they're intended for groups. Yes, there's a Second Coming imagery that's involved in all of them. But when you look at the pattern, there is not a single imprecatory or wrath-based prayer that is not in complete alignment and – listen – asking for the fulfillment of what God has already written. When you get to verse 10 when it talks about them going into the fire, coals being upon their head, you do understand that even Jesus in Matthew 25 spoke of his Second Coming, he said, "On my right hand there will be those who go into life everlasting, on my left hand those who go into the lake of fire." You get into Revelation 20, that famous judgment scene where it says, "I saw the dead small and great, rich and

poor, stand before him. Those whose works were written in the book of works," in other words, they try to justify them, they tried to somehow redeem themselves by their own deeds, "they were cast into the lake of fire. This is called the second death."

That's exactly what the Bible says and that, my friends, is very important because as we transition into asking ourselves a question, "Can we pray like this? Is it right for us to pray like this?" These prayers are never aimed at individuals who have "done wrong," they're always ultimately fulfilled at the Second Coming, and we don't have the right to pray anything that God has not already spoken as is going to come to fruition. We don't have the right to make up what we want to do and say, "Alright, God, get 'em!" That's not what these kind of prayers are.

So last but not least, is it for us? Is this something that as we watch what's happening in our world, as we hear the volume of opposition, as we see the just overt defiance to the things of God in our culture, is this something that we should pray? Is this something we should participate in? Should we have an imprecatory prayer walk? I mean, is that something we should do? Let me remind you of some things.

Let's talk about our purpose for just a moment. What's the purpose of the church? Now when I use that word, it has a whole lot of understanding for a whole lot of different people. I'm not talking strict sticks and bricks. I'm not talking names on the front. The church of Jesus Christ is composed of people exclusively who understand they have a sin problem, that Jesus Christ alone and his shed blood is the sufficiency for their sin problem, and they've asked him to save them. You can be a member of an organization and not be a part of the church of Jesus Christ, okay? So when I use the term "church," we're talking about the saved, the born again, the redeemed. Last time I checked, our purpose – hear me clearly – is not to gather in groups. In fact, in Galatians 3, it talks about who is eligible for the body of Christ, who is eligible to be a believer. It says there's no male, there's no female, there's no Greek, there's no barbarian, there's no slave, there's no servant. In other words, listen to this, you do understand that people come to faith in Christ as an individual irrespective of what ever group they find themselves in. We, the church, the born again believers, are not commissioned as a group. Yes, we're the body of Christ but where in the Bible are called the group of Christ? We're not, we're called the body.

And I think this is where we struggle because if we look at that imagery, some of you are knees, some of you are toes, some of us are mouths, whatever it may be, and we tend to gravitate toward thinking everybody needs to be in our group. No. What is our purpose? To reach and all who are lost with the message of Jesus Christ. That's our purpose. It doesn't – hear me clearly – it doesn't matter what group they're a part of, all of them need Jesus. Even if it's a group you like or a group you don't, every "group" in our culture has people who need Jesus no matter how vile you think they are and because you think they're so vile, they may need Jesus even more than you think they do. So our purpose is always about reaching individuals. What does it say? "Whosoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." That's an individual. It doesn't matter where they came from, what group they're representing.

So that is our purpose. Let's talk about the perspective for just a moment. Ephesians 6, the famous passage where it talks about wearing the belt of truth, the helmet of salvation, the shield of faith, that famous armor of God, let's go back up to the beginning of that. It says that the wiles of the devil that we fight against – listen to what it says – we do not fight against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers and rulers of darkness. So that being said, why would we call out a group for their misbehavior when all they are is the manifestation of the power that's working behind them? You know Jesus Christ manifested this. I mean, think about it, Simon Peter, he has this wonderfully bipolar day in his life. It starts off pretty well. He confesses, "Jesus, you're the Christ, the Son of the living God." He said, "Woo, flesh and blood has not revealed that to you but my Father which is in heaven. Peter, good job." Later on Jesus says, "Now let me tell you how this is gonna work. They're going to capture me, they're going to crucify me, and I'm gonna lose my life on your behalf." Remember what Peter says? "Uh-uh, not on my watch," which is funny because he's the one that took off three times. He says, "That's not gonna happen." Do you remember what Jesus said? He did not say, "You disciples, you apostles, this group just can't seem to get it." He points at Simon Peter and says, "Satan, get behind me."

You see, I think one of the perspectives we need to have when we hear the language, when we see the actions, those groups, those people, whatever they may be, all they're doing is verbalizing the attack of the enemy that is a principality, a power, all they're doing is being agents of the devil. That's all they're being and it's easy to get upset with groups and it's easy to get upset with whatever it may be, but I think we need to get a proper perspective. If we're going to call out God's judgment, we need to understand that our purpose is to redeem people, not condemn them; our purpose or our perspective is that the opposition isn't flesh and blood but principalities, powers, rulers, etc.

And so what is the pattern? So John 15, it talks about Jesus fulfilling this imprecatory prayer of Psalm 69. Do you find it interesting that that which he did right before was wash their feet? How many times does Jesus tell us to forgive them? Seventy times seven. I mean, even Peter finds himself in the same position, "God, how much longer do I have to put up with this." And he said 70 times 7. By the way, you know that's not an arbitrary number? Seventy times seven is 490, the exact amount of years in the book of Daniel that God said, "I'm gonna pour out my wrath on my people because they've rebelled against me." Do you see the pattern here? The fulfillment of Scripture, us continuing to live life. You realize Jesus said, "I came not to be served but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many." He said in John 16, "Hey, marvel not if the world hates you, they hated me first." We're to love those that are hard to love. We're to serve those who don't appreciate it, and by the way, Jesus healed 10 lepers and only one came back to say thank you. We will not receive thanks. We will not receive accolades. In fact, I get nervous when we do. When the world begins to put us on a pedestal, we may be headed the world's way.

So what is the pattern? Do you know what the Bible tells us in the very last verse? "Even so, come Lord Jesus." I'm just gonna speak on behalf of all of us. You may not feel this

way but I do. I'm a little weary of what we see going on in this world. I'm tired of it. I'm irritated that you can have 100 different means by which somebody could be blamed but they're gonna blame the church and the Christians. I'm irritated that churches can't do something that other people can. I see all that going on and I know what my flesh wants to do and I know what your flesh wants to do, I want to call down some coals and fire. I'm ready, "Get 'em, God! Get 'em!" So how do we do it? Are you ready? This is the whole billet, folks: you want the wrath of God poured out on those who just continually come in opposition against him and us, you know what you pray for? You pray for him to come back. That's what you pray. You don't have the privilege to enact revenge. He said that when he returns, he will pour out his wrath.

So what is our pattern? We keep on serving even though it's not appreciated. We keep on loving even though they don't appreciate it. And we keep on healing even though they won't thank us. But we can pray that the Lord calls us home. We can pray of his soon return because when Jesus comes back, folks, guess what? The pain for us is over and that which we desire takes place. Our prayer of wrath is not an individual, it's not a group, our prayer is asking the Lord himself because it's his time frame to split the skies and to come on back because when he does, all this stuff will take place. You know how you can get yourself in a mess? You start doing things that are reserved for Jesus Christ alone. It's his role to pour out wrath. It's his role to judge. But we can do what Hebrews 4 says, we can go boldly before his throne and we can seek him out. And so until that day that he returns, our pattern is to love, to serve and to give, but we can pray his return because when he does, that which we so desire to see that is rightfully his will come to fruition.