

VENGEANCE, JUSTICE & LOVE¹

Psalm 109

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road / Plymouth, MI 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 02.20.2005

“He will live to regret it.” “She will live to be sorry for it.” “They will reap what they have sown.” Have you ever uttered these words or words like them? I confess, I have. And in so doing, do we realize how subtle we have become in wishing vengeance on someone? Do we realize how carefully we have disguised our ill will?

“But Royce,” someone may object, “when I said, ‘He’ll live to regret it,’ I was not calling down curses on that person. I was not beseeching God to blast them with hell-fire and brimstone. I was only, and sadly, predicting what is going to happen.” Ah yes . . . “only predicting” . . . and all the while not admitting that what we predict gives us a certain satisfaction.²

There are those psalms, like 82 and 94, that call on God to exercise justice.

Ps 82:8: “Arise, O God, judge the earth, / for all the nations are Your possession” (TANAKH).

Ps 94:1-2: “God of retribution, LORD, / God of retribution, appear! / Rise up, judge of the earth, / give the arrogant their deserts!” (TANAKH).

Both of these psalms are bothered by the massive evil that afflicts society, and they beseech God to do something about it—do something about it in the here and now, not in some far-distant-judgment day.

“God of retribution” is often misleadingly translated as “God of vengeance.” To the popular mind, “vengeance” paints a negative, primitive picture of religion. “Vengeance” is usually taken to mean “revenge,” and implies actions prompted by unworthy motives. The underlying Hebrew,³ however, means nothing of the kind, for in most instances, it

¹Originally, this sermon was entitled “Two Problem Psalms,” and I had intended to cover both Psalm 88 and Psalm 109. Then, I had planned to follow with a discussion of Psalms 82 and 94, addressing the question: “How Long Will Evil Prevail?” See the previous sermon in this series for a treatment of Psalm 88. This sermon combines the issues involved in Psalms 109, 82, and 94.

²C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1958), 23: “‘Well,’ we say, ‘he’ll live to be sorry for it,’ as if we were merely, even regretfully, predicting; not noticing, certainly not admitting, that what we predict gives us a certain satisfaction.”

³The biblical Hebrew stem is *n-q-m*.

signifies an action with a worthy motive, an action that is purposeful and intended to serve the needs of justice. Unlike “revenge,” which is basically antisocial and seeks retaliation, “retribution” is concerned with restoring social order and seeks justice.

But, where do we draw the line between retribution and vengeance? Where do we draw the line between justice and revenge? Where do we draw the line between vindication and vindictiveness? It is here that we must deal with what are referred to as “the imprecatory psalms”—the psalms of cursing. As C. S. Lewis observed, “In some of the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth.”⁴ And so, we now come face-to-face with Psalm 109, the most terrible and contemptible of all the Psalms.

Psalm 109 reads:

O God, whom I praise,
do not remain silent,
for wicked and deceitful men
have opened their mouths against me;
they have spoken against me with lying tongues.
With words of hatred they surround me;
they attack me without cause.
In return for my friendship they accuse me,
but I am a man of prayer.
They repay me evil for good,
and hatred for my friendship.

Appoint an evil man to oppose him;
let an accuser stand at his right hand.
When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
and may his prayers condemn him.
May his days be few;
may another take his place of leadership.
May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow.
May his children be wandering beggars;
may they be driven from their ruined homes.
May a creditor seize all he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.
May no one extend kindness to him
or take pity on his fatherless children.
May his descendants be cut off,
their names blotted out from the next generation.

⁴Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, 20.

May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered
before the LORD;
may the sin of his mother never be blotted out.
May their sins always remain before the LORD,
that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth.

For he never thought of doing a kindness,
but hounded to death the poor
and the needy and the brokenhearted.

He loved to pronounce a curse —
may it come on him;
he found no pleasure in blessing —
may it be far from him.

He wore cursing as his garment;
it entered into his body like water,
into his bones like oil.

May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
like a belt tied forever around him.

May this be the LORD's payment to my accusers,
to those who speak evil of me.

But you, O Sovereign LORD,
deal well with me for your name's sake;
out of the goodness of your love, deliver me.

For I am poor and needy,
and my heart is wounded within me.

I fade away like an evening shadow;
I am shaken off like a locust.

My knees give way from fasting;
my body is thin and gaunt.

I am an object of scorn to my accusers;
when they see me, they shake their heads.

Help me, O LORD my God;
save me in accordance with your love.

Let them know that it is your hand,
that you, O LORD, have done it.

They may curse, but you will bless;
when they attack they will be put to shame,
but your servant will rejoice.

My accusers will be clothed with disgrace
and wrapped in shame as in a cloak.

With my mouth I will greatly extol the LORD;
in the great throng I will praise him.

For he stands at the right hand of the needy one,
to save his life from those who condemn him (NIV).

Although Psalm 109 begins and ends like a typical prayer for help or a typical complaint by an individual, verses 6-19—the beef between the bread—is “a raw undisciplined song of hate and wish for vengeance by someone who has suffered deep hurt and humiliation.”⁵ But before we are tempted to dismiss these verses as nothing but a desire for unlimited revenge, it is important to consider the context. Verses 1-5 suggest that the psalmist, although innocent, has been put on trial. So then, it is crucial that we hear these words as those of an unjustly accused person; the psalmist comes to God as one who is “poor and needy” (v. 22).

The psalmist turns the tables and puts the enemies on trial, and the desire for vengeance covers all the bases, to say the least. Even so, it is important to notice that the psalmist’s request is in accordance with what most persons, then and now, would say is only fair—the punishment should fit the crime. Finally, the psalmist turns his or her case over to God.

What are we to do with this psalm today? Who needs to pray like this today? Who is justified in praying like this today? This psalm could be the voice of a woman who is victimized by rape, who surely knows this kind of rage and who does not need “due process” to know the proper outcome. This psalm could be the voice of a parent when the dead body of their abducted child has been found. This psalm could be the voice of those who lost loved ones in the attack of September 11, 2001. This psalm could be the voice of brutalized and humiliated minorities throughout the world. This psalm could be the voice from beyond the grave of the half million Iraqi children who died due to the harsh economic sanctions imposed on Iraq as a means to punish Saddam Hussein. This psalm could be the voice . . . I will stop.

Do you know what bothers me the most? It is *not* the hatred that is expressed in Psalm 109; it *is* the hatred that is expressed every day in our world. The fact that I can so easily imagine this vicious, vindictive psalm on the lips of so many in this world is what bothers me the most. Yes, there is rage, revenge, and retaliation in the Psalms; but there is rage, revenge, and retaliation among us. The real problem is not with the Psalms, it is with our world—Psalm 109 simply “tells it like it is.” Perhaps what we find most

⁵Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Augsburg, 1984), 83.

offensive in this psalm is the fact that it is so attuned to and so in touch with our world.

In the final analysis, Psalm 109 teaches us not only about ourselves and our world, but also about God. It instructs us that evil, injustice, and oppression must be confronted, opposed, and hated because God hates them.⁶ From this perspective, the psalmist's desire for vengeance amounts to a desire for justice and righteousness— amounts to a desire that God's will be done on earth as it is heaven.⁷ "To pray Psalm 109 is a commitment to bear one another's burdens, to stand in solidarity and in suffering with the abused, the victimized, and the oppressed, because that is where God stands (v. 31)."⁸

But there is more. Not only does Psalm 109 bring rage into the presence of God, it relinquishes that rage to God. The wrath and hatred are submitted to the Lord God—submitted to Him for Him to do as He wills. God will exercise justice; He will execute retribution; and He will do so in His own way and in His own time—and perhaps not as we would wish and hope. "Psalm 109, then, is a marvelous act of liberation."⁹ When we reserve for ourselves the drive for vengeance, it means that we do not trust God sufficiently to submit that to His governing power.

Whose power do we believe will govern this world? If we believe it is or will be any human power, then Psalm 109 will continue to "tell it like it is"—that we live in a world obsessed with taking the law into its own hands. If we believe the power that governs this world is God, we will be liberated to pray Psalm 109. We can take our angry, but honest, pleas into God's presence. And such prayer will remove the necessity for us to take actual revenge upon the enemy. If we believe that it is God's power that rules this world, then and only then, does this vehement, violent psalm become a liberating act of nonviolence.

As I wrestled with Psalm 109, the words of the Lord's Prayer kept coming to my mind.

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be Thy name.
Thy kingdom come.

⁶See Ps 82.

⁷See Matt 6:10.

⁸J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms*, The New Interpreter's Bible, vol. IV (Abingdon, 1996), 1128.

⁹Brueggeman, *The Message of the Psalms*, 86.

Thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For Thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory, forever.
Amen (Matt 6:9-13, NASB).

When we are able to pray *both* Psalm 109 *and* the Lord's Prayer *together*, perhaps it will be because we have come to believe the words of Moses and the Apostle Paul:

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," [Deut 32:35] says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom 12:19-21, NIV).

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