

Psalms: Ask God to Right Wrongs Sunday, 8/8/21

Last week, we came to understand praise, thanksgiving, worship, and serving God as being essential facets of the same thing. The psalms teach us that we can live in joy and contentment when we serve the Lord with gladness, give thanks to him and blessing his name.

This week, we'll tackle those uncomfortable "cursing" psalms that we all tend to skip over. Do they have anything to teach us today, or are they best forgotten, outdated ideas that betray the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Did King David really ask God to skewer his enemies on a javelin, as we just heard in Psalm 35? Yes, I'm afraid he did. How did we get from that Old Testament psalm to the New Testament scene in the Garden of Gethsemane, in Matthew 26, where Jesus told one of the disciples, "Put away your sword...Those who use the sword will die by the sword."¹ Let's try to understand that by working backwards, starting with some of what we know from some of the other relevant New Testament writings.

We read in Romans 12, "Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them...Never pay back evil with more evil. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone...[N]ever take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, 'I will take revenge; I will pay them back,' says the LORD."²

That's a pretty complete summary of our understanding of our spiritual relationship with our enemies, right? Pray that God will bless them and don't try to get revenge. Why? For the sake of peace, and because God will judge them according to God's righteousness.

James agrees in his letter, saying "your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you. God alone, who gave the law, is the Judge. He alone has the power to save or to destroy. So what right do you have to judge your neighbor?"³

Perhaps this next passage in Matthew is the one we think of first when we try to understand the curses David calls down on his enemies. Jesus teaches us, "love your

¹ Matthew 26:52. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

² Romans 12:14-19. Ibid.

³ James 4:11-12, Ibid.

enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!”⁴ Luke offers an expanded version of the same teaching, saying, “love your enemies! Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who hurt you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, offer the other cheek also...Do to others as you would like them to do to you.”⁵

These are all well-taught Scriptures, the stuff of Sunday School lessons and countless sermons. There’s an undeniable ethic of love that’s taught and practiced in the New Testament, and underscored by the life and self-sacrifice of Jesus.

What we’re also taught in Sunday School is that the Old Testament law instructs us to fight our enemies, while Jesus brought us a brand new ethic of love. But hold on a second. Just how new was it? When Jesus said, “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy,”⁶ was Jesus quoting from the Old Testament? No, he wasn’t. He was actually speaking to a broken misunderstanding of the law. Even a casual look at the Old Testament reveals a deep commitment to an ethic of love in God’s teaching.

The most important of the texts comes directly from the Torah, in Leviticus 19:18: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against a fellow Israelite, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.”⁷ This law formed the core of the Hebrew understanding of what it meant to live a righteous life. The biggest difference between this teaching and the teachings of Jesus is the scope. Leviticus seems to define “neighbor” as other Israelites, while Jesus appeared to define neighbor as anyone else in need. But then along comes Exodus 23:4, which opens it right up again: “If you come upon your enemy’s ox or donkey that has strayed away, take it back to its owner. If you see that the donkey of someone who hates you has collapsed under its load, do not walk by. Instead, stop and help.”⁸ That sounds like an inclusive ethic of love to me!

Two proverbs also exhort us to treat our enemies well, although the rationale given is quite a bit less noble. They read, “Don’t rejoice when your enemies fall; don’t be happy when they stumble. For the LORD will be displeased with you and will turn his anger away

⁴ Matthew 5:44. Ibid.

⁵ Luke 6:27-31. Ibid.

⁶ Matthew 5:43. Ibid.

⁷ Leviticus 19:18. Ibid.

⁸ Exodus 23:4. Ibid.

from them.”⁹ And also, “If your enemies are hungry, give them food to eat. If they are thirsty, give them water to drink. You will heap burning coals of shame on their heads, and the LORD will reward you.”¹⁰

Although the ethic of inclusive love is not as well developed in the Old Testament, God is love, no less in the time of Moses than today. Let’s hear from one more of the cursing psalms, and see if we can discern the presence of this ethic of love, even as David asks for the punishment of his enemies. I’m reading from Psalm 10 in the New Living Translation.

{Read Psalm 10 NLT}

Understanding Psalm 10 comes by answering the question, “Who are these people?” It helps to remember that this psalm is attributed to David, the God-anointed King of Israel. Therefore the enemies of David are by definition the enemies of God. David identifies them simply as the wicked. They are doers of evil and doubters of God. One commentator even went so far as to call them “functional atheists,” those who behave as if there was no God guiding their choices.

But as frequently as the wicked are cited, it’s the helpless who are the focus of the psalm. Who are the helpless? David describes them as the innocent, the poor, the orphans, and the oppressed. They are the victims of the wicked who are lacking the normal means to defend themselves.

Psalm 10 isn’t about David seeking revenge against his personal enemies. It’s a cry out to God for justice- not for himself, but for the people over whom God has appointed him King. David understands that vengeance belongs to the Lord, and so he cries out to God to right the obvious wrongs that he sees happening in his kingdom.

None of us are kings, but all of us are stewards of the people and gifts of God we enjoy in this life. Perhaps what we can best learn from the cursing psalms is that it’s ok to cry out to God when we see evil and injustice in this world, asking that God’s righteousness be made plain and that doers of injustice be stopped.

Who are the helpless in 2021? How about the children living in unimaginable places like landfills? Several billion people on this planet don’t have access to proper toilets, with at

⁹ Proverbs 24:17-18. Ibid.

¹⁰ Proverbs 25:21-22. Ibid.

least a billion simply defecating in the open, creating breeding grounds for hepatitis, cholera, and dysentery. Millions of children play in landfills and swim in polluted water.¹¹ We can and should cry out to God for these children and the just restoration of their environments.

How about immigrants? Imagine learning a new language as you go, finding housing and a job, helping your children make new friends and succeed in schools that are completely different than what they've ever seen before. Now imagine doing that in the face of prejudice and persecution. We can and should cry out to God for immigrants and the elimination of the unjust conditions they're often made to endure.

How about the homeless? There are as many as 1.5 million homeless people living in the United States.¹² The chronically homeless often suffer from malnutrition, mental health issues, substance abuse, domestic violence, and disabilities.¹³ We can and should cry out to God for the homeless, and the indifference and systemic biases that perpetuate their plight.

How about the hungry? Most hungry people in our country don't look like this, but it's estimated that 12 million children in the U.S. are living in poverty, and 13 million children are food-insecure.¹⁴ Food shelf donations are a good thing, but we should also cry out to God for the hungry, here and around the world, for a more just distribution of the most basic things we count on for living.

Contrary to what you may have been taught, there actually are wrong ways for Christians to pray. Praying for God to smite your rival soccer team is simply a bad idea. Praying for God to strike down people with different political leanings is a fail as well. In fact, praying for anything that doesn't coincide with the agenda and heart of God is usually fruitless at best.

Is it ever right to ask God to curse our enemies? I suggest that a healthier approach for 21st century Christians is to keep our eyes focused on the things that God cares about. God cares about the weak and helpless, the lost, and the left out. God cares about righteous living and justice. When we cry out to God to right a wrong- not just for our own sake, but for the

¹¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/in-worlds-poorest-slums-landfills-and-polluted-rivers-become-a-childs-playground>

¹² <https://www.prb.org/resources/how-many-people-in-the-united-states-are-experiencing-homelessness/>

¹³ <https://medlineplus.gov/homelesshealthconcerns.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.nokidhungry.org/who-we-are/hunger-facts?>

sake of God's Kingdom, we acknowledge that God is the ultimate judge and the final righter of wrongs. That kind of prayer doesn't excuse us from playing our part in actively advancing social justice, but it does frame our battles in the context we need for victory.

Please take some time now to reflect on God's concern for the helpless. Who are the helpless people you'll cry out to God for? What wrongs need righting?



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