

Living Under Threat of Violence with the Imprecatory Psalms

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Question 26: "How doth Christ execute the office of a king?"

*Answer: Christ executeth the office of a king, in subduing us to himself, in ruling and defending us, and in restraining and conquering all his and our enemies."*¹

I. Orientation: God's values

A. The challenge: love (and hatred?) of enemies

Key examples: Psalm 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 94, 109, 129, 137, 139, and 140

B. The goal: Staying sensitive

1. To evil

"And whoever welcomes a little child like this in My name welcomes Me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." (Matt 18:5-6)

2. To suffering

3. To the heart of God

"For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save their lives from those who would condemn them." Ps 109:31

C. The task: Preparing for seasons of great suffering

II. Disorientation: God's validation

A. The challenge: God's covenant promises and delayed justice

B. The goal: strive faithfully with the resources God provides

1. **God validates the truth in our confusion**

a) The crazy-making words of the oppressor

Example: Violence in marriage²

¹ Westminster Shorter Catechism

² Leslie Vernick, *The Emotionally Destructive Marriage: How to Find Your Voice and Reclaim Your Hope* (WaterBrook, 2013).

“Their venom is like the venom of a snake,
like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears,
that will not heed the tune of the charmer,
however skillful the enchanter may be.
Break the teeth in their mouths, O God;
Lord, tear out the fangs of those lions!” (Ps 58:4-6)

b) The crazy-making world of the oppressor

Example: Bullying³

“All day long they twist my words; all their schemes are for my ruin . . . They conspire, they lurk, they watch my steps, hoping to take my life.” (Ps 56:5-6, cf., 69:10-13)

“But when I stumbled, they gathered in glee . . . They slandered me without ceasing. Like the ungodly they maliciously mocked; they gnashed their teeth at me” (Ps 35:15-16)

2. God validates our dignity

a) By giving us a voice

(1) Why silence (at some point) becomes destructive

(2) Why speaking (at some point) becomes necessary

b) By giving us access

(1) To himself

“All of the psalms **provide us with a spiritual vocabulary for encounter with God** in every circumstance. The psalms of enmity provide the Christian reader with the means of dealing with the evils of human experience in a way that is true to the divine abhorrence of social injustice and to our own loathing of the moral abominations that are all too prevalent in our world.” (Jamie A. Grant)⁴

(2) To others

“There may be little of anything, but there can be shared singing.” - Diane Langberg⁵

³ Emily Bazelon, *Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy* (Random House, 2014).

⁴ Jamie A. Grant, “Crisis, Cursing and the Christian: Reading Imprecatory Psalms in the Twenty-First Century.” *Foundations* 74-1, 2018.

⁵ Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God* (New Growth, 2015), p. 173-174.

“Confound them in their sin till they / To Thee for pardon fly,/ Till in dismay they, trembling, own, / That Thou art God Most High.”⁶

C. The task: speak faithfully through the struggle

“These poems are not visceral, bile-laden outpourings of rage. They are rather carefully crafted poetic (and prayerful . . .) responses to violence that has already been perpetrated on the psalmist and his community.” (Jamie A. Grant)⁷

III. Reorientation: God’s vindication

A. The challenge:

1. The tension between God’s covenant promises and righteous suffering
2. God’s resolution in Christ

B. The goal: Finding safety amid the dangers

1. Finding danger in the world (and in us)
2. Finding safety in Christ

C. The task:

1. Transforming fragmented stories of pain into testimonies
2. Entrusting our souls to God for safekeeping

Harder yet may be the fight;
right may often yield to might;
wickedness a while may reign;
Satan's cause may seem to gain.

But there's a God that rules above
with hand of power and heart of love;
and if I'm right, he'll fight my battle,
I shall have peace someday,
I shall have peace someday.⁸

⁶ Psalm 83 “O God, No Longer Hold Thy Peace,” *Psalter Hymnal*.

⁷ Grant continues, explaining the basis of these psalms as based in the law of eye-for-an-eye justice: “A good example of this is found in that most unpalatable of enmity psalms, 137. According to historical record, the invading Babylonian armies, such was their rage after the long siege, hurled the children of survivors from the Temple Mount to be dashed on the rocks below.”

⁸ Charles Albert Tindley, “Beams of Heaven.”

Free or Popular-Level Resources

Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Songs of Jesus: A Year of Daily Devotions*. New York: Viking, 2015.

Julie Lowe, “When Violence Touches the Life of a Child.” *CCEF*.

<https://www.ccef.org/resources/blog/violence-touches-childs-life>

William Ross, “Should We Pray the Imprecatory Psalms?” *TGC*.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/should-we-pray-the-imprecatory-psalms/>