

Notes on Psalm 58 and Psalms of Imprecation

II. QUOTABLE QUOTES AND SUMMARY NOTES

"[P]salm [58] takes sin seriously, laying out the problem as well as God's way of dealing with it: God takes the righteous seriously and rewards them, and he also deals with sin appropriately and judges the earth (58:11)." (Bullock, 446.)

"It may come as a shock to realize that despite our profession of Christ-like love of foes, our real attitude is more attuned to Psalm 58." (Marvin Tate.)

"It does matter who your god is! Yahweh is the God who takes no pleasure in evil. Wickedness does not dwell with him. Yahweh is at the same time incompatible with evil and relentlessly good. As the preceding Psalm 57 put it, 'great is [his] covenant loyalty reaching to the heavens; [his] enduring faithfulness to the skies (57:10, lit. trans.) Psalm 58 agrees, for in Yahweh 'there is a God who judges the earth' with uprightness (58:1, 11)." (Wilson, 846.)

"We live—at least, in some countries we still live—in a milder age. These poets lived in a world of savage punishments, of massacre and violence, of blood sacrifice in all countries and human sacrifice in many." (C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms, 23.)

"We may observe that when the church devalues the seriousness of sin, the corollary is that the church is likely to devalue the wonder of grace. . . This psalm takes sin seriously, laying out the problem as well as God's way of dealing with it: God takes the righteous seriously and rewards them, and he also deals with sin appropriately and judges the earth (58:11). If we want to take this Old Testament doctrine into the New Testament stratosphere of grace, we may stress the New Testament doctrine that Christ took our judgment and became sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), taking grace to a new level of absolute triumph over sin." (Bullock, 446.)

"While Psalm 58 does not deal specifically with the topic of forgiveness, it does raise the reader's consciousness of the power of sin and God's determined plan to reward the righteous (58:10). Behind that word (tsedeq = salvation, well-being), lies the power of God's forgiving grace that makes us righteous." (Bullock, 447.)

"When the powers which try to rule the earth are unmasked, their strength drains away. They shoot arrows, but they land harmlessly. The "Mighty Ones" are, after all, only wicked human beings who have either allowed themselves to be used by the powers, or have deliberately chosen to make common cause with the 'rulers of darkness' which invade and bedevil our lives. With psalms like 58, we rip their masks away and their power melts away." (Tate, Psalms 51-100, 91).

Summaries in effect:

1. "Key Themes of Psalm 58:

- *Evil demands that we have a long view of history
- *The perpetrators of evil eventually become its victims." (Bullock, 441.)

2. "The destruction of God's enemies is part of bringing a fallen and distorted creation back under his sovereignty. It is part of transforming the world by removing evil once and for all in order to restore God's original purpose and intention. What can a charmer do with a cobra that refuses to participate

harmoniously in the charming game? The cobra that has ‘stopped its ears’ and seeks only to destroy will itself be eliminated from the restored creation of God.” (Wilson, 845.)

3. “Acknowledging that the world is dominated by the twisted power of the wicked, the psalmist calls on God to punish them and set everything right so that all humanity will admit that ‘surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth.’” (Wilson, NIVAC, 839.)

On Imprecations (“cursings”) in the Psalms

“It is monstrously simple minded to read the cursings in the Psalms with no feeling except one of horror at the uncharity of the poets. They are indeed devilish. But we must also think of those who made them so. Their hatreds are in reaction to something.” (C. S. Lewis, *Reflections*, 26).

“[W]ithin Judaism itself the corrective to this natural reaction already existed, ‘Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart . . . thou shalt not avenge or bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’” (Bullock.)

“The imprecatory psalms do indeed renounce personal vengeance, and explicitly leave their cause to God; nevertheless, the singers of these songs are not mere onlookers. This is not an arena but a battlefield, and the righteous are not spectators of, but participants in, the ‘struggle against the powers of this dark world’ [Eph. 6:12]. ‘With justice’ the Rider on the white horse ‘judges and makes war’ [Rev. 19:11]. It is entirely right for his soldiers to rejoice in his victory, that is, in the destruction of evil, here graphically described as *the blood of the wicked*.” (Wilcock, 210.)

“This part of Book II (Psalms 42-72) of the Psalter is awash in enemies, who also dominate the perspective of Psalm 88. Enemies are ever present, but the deeper the confession of faith in this psalm is the reign of God over all creation, including the enemies.” (Brueggemann and Bellinger, *Psalms*, 260).

“When bitterness and pain are poured out to God, the way may be cleared for a fresh vision of reality and new trust in God. These psalms help to purify us of feelings of rage, and also of dereliction and abandonment. They lead toward a catharsis of faith and a renewal of the soul. They also help us to realize that there is no place or condition of life where God is not.” (Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 91.)

A more dismissive view, by C. S. Lewis: “We must not [. . .] yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious [. . .] The hatred is there—festering gloating, undisguised—and also we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it, or (worse still) used it to justify similar passions in ourselves.” (C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*.)

III. ISSUES

A. *Are the wicked spoken of in the first few verses gods or human rulers?*

They could be either, the evidence for each being about the same. Though a good, well-informed Israelite living at a time when much of the Bible had been written ought to have been a monotheist, and often was, it was nonetheless commonplace for other gods to be part of common parlance and even theorized. Here, then, the psalmist, in the absence of God yet putting things to right, might typically

invoke concepts of gods who were morally inept, whimsical, and often silent. Yet, human rulers suit the reference to them being born (though many gods were thought similarly to have been born). Ultimately it doesn't matter which--gods, rulers or both--gods in vv 1-2, human rulers in vv. 3-5 as I believe-- since it was thought that God (or the gods) put rulers on earth to govern properly. This is "the concept of the apportioned assignment of divine beings, or angels, to support and establish justice among the people to whom they were assigned The actual functions of the divine beings were exercised, of course, by human agents: kings, leaders, judges." (Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 85.)

"Whether the opening question in Psalm 58 is addressed to unjust divine beings or unjust humans, the psalm makes it clear that both wrongdoing and violence are woven into the very fabric of the human experience and that leaders, whether heavenly or earthly, encourage this evil and violence." (Brueggemann and Bellinger, 260-61.)

2. How to reconcile the imprecations with the kingdom ethic taught by Jesus

This is a good question and a real problem. Worth considering is to distinguish a kingdom ethic of interpersonal turning the other cheek, from an ethic of national/societal governance of measured 'punitive justice.' (Bullock)

"[W]e may ask the question whether we should make a distinction between interpersonal relationships, on the one hand (in which we are to love our enemies and turn the other cheek, etc.), and the behavior of those responsible for carrying out justice in society, on the other. It is generally recognized that Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is talking about who we should live as kingdom people, not about how society should function or how governing officials should deal with crime." (C. Hassel Bullock, *Psalms I*, TTTCS, 268).

NOTES ON THE PSALMS OF IMPRECATION (CURSING)

1. Chris Dow, "Should They Be Wiped Out of the Land of the Living? Restoring the Omitted Portions of the Imprecatory Psalms," (<https://prayerbook.ca/the-omitted-imprecatory-psalms/>).

"It is important to notice that the imprecations are not arbitrary and impulsive calls for unrestrained vengeance, but specific requests for the wicked to receive in themselves what they have inflicted upon others. This symmetrical exchanges is especially clear in Psalm 109: *His delight was in cursing; let curses come upon him* (Ps 109:16). (Dow.)

"Thus these psalms are not barbaric screams of blind rage. They are carefully crafted prayers that draw deeply from the imagery and themes of a central narrative trajectory in the Bible: namely the *protoevangelium* of Gen. 3:15. God's promise that the seed of woman—Christ in his Saints—would crush the head of the serpent. To pray the imprecatory Psalms is to trust and engage in the outworking of this promise: *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet* (Romans 16:20). (ibid.)

Here are "five ways and reasons to pray the imprecatory psalms.

- i. One, first pray them against yourself! As the Prayer Book reminds us, we need to 'acknowledge and confess our manifold sins and wickedness' (p. 77) and continually mortify our 'corrupt affections' (p. 180). In the words of the forgotten fourth verse of the great Christmas hymn Hark! the Herald Angels Sing: 'Rise the woman's conquering seed/bruise *in us* the serpent's head.' Praying the imprecatory Psalms is a sobering spiritual exercise of self-reflection and repentance.

- ii. Second, pray them on behalf of all those who are abused, exploited, and persecuted by the wicked.
- iii. Third, pray them for the sake of the wicked, that their ways would be thwarted before matters get worse—not least for the wicked themselves! Ps 58 is an urgent call for God to intervene and stop the ungodly before their evil and violent plots can be fully realized: *‘Before they bear fruit let them be cut off like a brier’* (Psalm 58:9). Strange though it may seem at first, to pray the imprecatory Psalms is to obey our Lord's command to *love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* (Matt. 5:44).
- iv. Fourth, pray them because doing so puts your enemy in the hands of God, thus lifting the burden of resentment off your shoulders, relieving you of the desire to take revenge (Rom. 12:19).
- v. Fifth, pray them because it is your God-given privilege and responsibility to participate in Christ's victory over evil. *Such honour have all his saints* (Psalm 149:9).” (Dow, *ibid.*)

2. Input on Ps 58 from the commentary of W. Brueggemann & W. H. Bellinger, Jr., (p. 262):

- i. First, the central part of the psalm is in the form of a prayer. It is not in the form of a curse or of a call for human violence. It is rather addressed to God in the hope that God will bring justice. . . . The psalm is not so much about personal vengeance as it is about the hope for God's justice.
- ii. Second, the psalm worries about persistent and violent evil. . . The stunning poetic imagery portrays this persistent evil in troubling and pressing ways. In the New Testament the imagery is akin got that in 2 Thess. 1:5:1-12.
- iii. Third . . . the psalm is a bold act of faith, taking the pain and anger of injustice to the one who can act powerfully. In the Hebrew tradition the execution of justice is the divine prerogative. . . . [T]he lively and intense dialogue of faith modeled in the Hebrew psalter includes the arresting presence of evil in the world as part of the wrestling with faith and with God. Theological issues are pressing. Faith in the Psalter is not idealistic but disturbingly realistic.
- iv. Fourth [give pause] . . . before identifying contemporary evildoers with those in the psalm. The evil portrayed in the text does not seem to reflect routine conflicts of everyday life but rather extreme embodiments of injustice. . . . [Wilcock implicitly agrees by quoting Manning who in the 1930s said of this psalm “worth the attention of Hitler.” One may also think of a thoroughly corrupt police force or judicial system as examples of pervasive, persistent evil.]

3. Ten Observations by Glen on the Imprecatory Psalms

1. Jesus' teaching to love our enemies and turn the other cheek when struck must be held in balance with his righteous anger against injustice, shown for example when he verbally attacks hypocritical religious leaders, and uses a whip in the temple courts after turning over the money tables. Jesus spoke concretely about the fate of the wicked as going to a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. Ponder the meaning of “Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.”

2. These prayers are offered to God, not acted upon by humans. They are expressions of trust in—and even more, loyalty to— God more than hatred against other humans.

3. Unlike Hebrew language and culture, our language (and others such as French) and culture is more sanitized, and where it is not, we invoke such things as Latin to soften what is harsh.

4. Our life in Canada is exceptional for its peacefulness. If we had lived in Rwanda in the 1990s we would likely have more sympathy for emotionally charged prayers against those who had recently butchered family members, including women and young children. It is a blessing to be in a peaceful setting where one is 'deeply troubled' by the violence of the words of imprecation.

5. It is not simply the words that bother us, but, more so, the realization that there is something in us that is able to understand and relate to them. Perhaps it is that they remind us of our own capacity for hatred that bothers us.¹ Put another way, we realize how great a challenge it is for us to be angry, yet not sin (isn't this what the psalmist accomplished?) as we are called to be by the Apostle Paul.

6. The cursing psalms are an expression of faith. As Brueggemann has said, "The raw speech of rage can be submitted to Yahweh because there is reason for confidence that Yahweh takes it seriously and will act"; and as Bonhoeffer said, "whoever entrusts rage to God dismisses any thought of ever taking revenge himself." (Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 89.)

7. The imprecations are an invitation to empathize with the sorely oppressed. "They may not be our prayers, at the moment at least, but they are the prayers of our brothers and sisters who are trampled down by persons and powers beyond their control." (Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 89).

8. There is a long Christian tradition, revived of late by Bonhoeffer and more recently by contemporary OT scholarship on the structure of the Psalter, to understand the imprecatory psalms as the prayers of Christ on behalf of the poor and needy.

9. The language of the enemies in the psalms typically transcends mere human enemies, extending to the 'principalities and powers' that are beyond mere 'flesh and blood.' (Eph. 6:12.) The imprecatory psalms serve to 'unmask' these powers and their destructive ways,² thereby depriving them of strength.

10. Most significantly (I believe), the afterlife and God's judgment of people after life had not been made clear; the wicked had to be punished now in this life or else, so it seemed, they would escape justice. This made more urgent Israel's cry for God to punish the wicked. Moreover, if such were not to happen, it wasn't simply a problem that people got away with murder, but that if they did, God would be unjust. In other words, behind these cries, the very character of God as just is at stake. In this sense the imprecations are a statement of Israel's belief in God.

Possible implication: These psalms invite us to bring out something that we might otherwise be too pious to admit (or not realize) is there. Murmuring these feelings can be cathartic and thus a means of grace, but only as we continue to pray for greater sanctification of our thoughts by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

¹ Reading the imprecatory psalms can not only remind us of the depths of anger that lie within us, but they can convict us of our own wrongdoing. "The imprecatory psalms may evoke in us who read them an awareness of our own violent sins and our hate, of our own need for confession, and for repentance." (Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 90.)

² Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 91.