

Psalm 35:1-28
July 3, 2011
Lynchburg, Virginia

EXHORDIUM

This is what we could call an imprecatory Psalm. An imprecation is essentially a curse. In the Psalm, David calls a curse upon his enemies. As we are seeking to restore the singing of Psalms in worship, we need to address the imprecatory Psalms. Are they still applicable to the New Testament church? How do the imprecatory Psalms reconcile with Jesus's words to bless your enemies, bless and curse not? How do they square with the Lord's words to not return evil for evil? Or to pray for those who spitefully use you? Or, to turn the other cheek?

The Psalms have been the song book of the Christian church for 3000 years. Three thousand years? Yes, David was penning them around 1000 B.C. and he is the ultimate Christ figure of the Old Testament. There is only one church and the old testament saints are part of Christ's Church. But it was not just Old Testament saints that sang the Psalms. The Christian Church until very recent times, really the last 100 years or so, has always sung the Psalms as part of faithful Christian worship.

No doubt, there has been a change in the administration of the covenant. The sacrifices have ceased. Circumcision is no longer necessary. The good news of the reign of King Jesus has gone out to all nations instead of Yahweh's authority being closely protected and guarded by the Jews only. The Holy Spirit has been poured out in an historically unprecedented way. So, there are some dramatic changes in the Church.

Given these changes, we need to rethink some of the language in the Psalms. The words of sacrifice, covenant, Israel and God's chosen people all need to be understood in the light of the Messiah being revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Worship no longer requires the blood of bulls and goats but we do worship based upon the ultimate and final sacrifice, Jesus Christ on the cross. Israel was God's chosen people but now all saints in Christ's Church are His chosen people. Israel has been expanded to fill up the entire Christian Church.

So, the types, shadows, and symbols have been filled up with the real things, Jesus, His Church, Christian people all over the world. The shekinah glory of God, once revealed over the cherubim in the holy of holies, is now revealed through the rent veil to the entire world within Christ's Church.

So, we do understand the words of the Psalms and of the entire Old Testament, for that matter in a new and more glorious manner. If we make these needed adjustments then the words of the Psalms take on an entirely fresh meaning in the worship of the Christian Church.

How does this relate to the imprecatory Psalms? Are they still within the realm of Christian worship given Jesus's words on how to view enemies?

In order to answer that question, we should look at how the other New Testament writers taught us to view the enemies of the gospel.

Here what St. Paul said in the letter to the Romans, **Rom 12:14-21** **14 Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. 15 Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. 16 Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. 17 Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. 18 If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. 19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. 20 Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. 21 Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.**

So, Paul was willing for his enemies to have the wrath of God poured out upon them. He does not expressly call for God's wrath to fall but leaving the outcome up to God, he does call upon the saints to heap coals of fire on your enemies head. How do we do this? Do we do this by stoking up the furnace of anger and vengeance? No, not at all. We do this by blessing instead of reviling. We do this by praying for our enemies. We do this by feeding our enemies. This seems to be exactly the wrong thing to do. But that is the way of the Christian.

We do what is right and leave the consequences up to God. If we take vengeance ourselves, we will never be able to repay as God would. Either,

we would take far too much vengeance upon one God would save. Or, we would take far too little vengeance upon one that God would destroy. Either way, we mess it all up. Why? Because we are not God and cannot see hearts, motivations, or God's future plans. So, we simply do what is right and we leave the details, whether ultimate blessing or cursing up to God. When we do right by someone and they despise us for it, God takes account of it and repays in kind.

Is this consistent with what David says and does in this imprecatory Psalm? I think it is. David is calling out for God's justice. He is not taking matters into his own hands. He is calling upon God to act based upon God's perfect knowledge of the situation. The words may seem strong or even harsh to us but David is pouring them out to God, not reviling his enemies directly.

It is not wrong for us to call upon God to do good, to hold the wicked to account, the sort out His blessing and cursing based upon His knowledge of who are His and who the real enemies are. In fact, if we refuse to take our own vengeance, this ensures that real justice will be accomplished. Sometimes, people that seem to be enemies may turn out to be allies. God has a way of turning enemies into friends. At other times, seeming allies prove disloyal and bring wickedness into the camp of the faithful. So, if we call upon God to sort it out, treading carefully in our limited wisdom, then God is sure to act. This takes time and therefore patience. If our good deeds heap coals of burning fire upon God's enemies, then we should understand that it takes a while to make a heap. One coal will not cook a steak, we need a pile to get the fire hot enough. So, be patient in doing good and leave the timing of the fire of judgment up to God.

EXEGESIS

35 Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me: fight against them that fight against me. 2 Take hold of shield and buckler, and stand up for mine help. 3 Draw out also the spear, and stop the way against them that persecute me: say unto my soul, I am thy salvation. 4 Let them be confounded and put to shame that seek after my soul: let them be turned back and brought to confusion that devise my hurt. 5 Let them be as chaff before the wind: and let the angel of the Lord

chase them. 6 Let their way be dark and slippery: and let the angel of the Lord persecute them. 7 For without cause have they hid for me their net in a pit, which without cause they have digged for my soul. 8 Let destruction come upon him at unawares; and let his net that he hath hid catch himself: into that very destruction let him fall.

At the beginning of this Psalm, we see David's heart. He calls upon God to please his cause. He is not pleading his own cause on his own. He is seeking an advocate in Heaven. God is over all and can see all. David acknowledges that at the beginning of his prayer.

He calls upon God to fight against those that fight against David. We should keep in mind also, that David is a Christ figure. He has been anointed King and therefore has the divine right of allegiance by the very men who persecute him. We see in this Psalm that he is a type of Christ, who was the true King of Israel but rejected by the very people who should have submitted to Him. Jesus speaks of their doom in the apocalyptic narratives in the gospels.

Another principle is important here in verses 7 and 8. David is calling upon these men to be judged by God according to the very stratagems that they have laid out against him. This sort of prayer is righteous. If the enemies of God seek to harm His people through lies and deceit, it is right for us to call upon God to call them to judgment and bring their downfall through their own lies and deceit.

9 And my soul shall be joyful in the Lord: it shall rejoice in his salvation.10 All my bones shall say, Lord, who is like unto thee, which deliverest the poor from him that is too strong for him, yea, the poor and the needy from him that spoileth him?

Joy at the center. How can David be joyful in the midst of all of this trouble. He is persecuted, slandered, pursued and plotted against, and yet he can speak of joy and rejoicing. The reason he can do this is exactly because he is leaving the outcome up to God. If God acts and brings judgment, David will give Him glory, honor and praise. If God delays and David must suffer, then David will give Him glory, honor and praise. This is the heart and mind of a man who truly trusts in God's Providence. That is the only way to find joy and rejoicing in the midst of trials.

Now, David does speak of rejoicing in the salvation of the Lord in verse 9. We should remember that he is not talking about getting saved and going to heaven. He is talking about God saving him from his enemies and vindicating him in real time. But he recognizes that it is God's salvation. God is the one who saves him and therefore he gives God the credit. David identifies himself here with the poor, weak and needy. Perhaps this is the time when Saul is persecuting David before he came to power. So, David is somewhat helpless against a king. But God is not helpless against a king and David takes refuge in God.

11 False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not. 12 They rewarded me evil for good to the spoiling of my soul.

When lies are told about you, you know the truth. Call upon God to vindicate you. David had not hurt these false witnesses and yet they sought to do him harm. Sometimes, the most damaging false witness is the one that knows you to some degree. They may take some perceived character flaw and totally fabricate a story about you. Do not be alarmed, you and God know the truth and in due time, the truth always wins over falsehoods. The liar cannot control himself. He keeps telling lies until the whole lot is revealed.

13 But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom. 14 I behaved myself as though he had been my friend or brother: I bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother.

What David records here comports well with the words of Jesus and St. Paul. David was not trying to harm even his enemies. They sought mischief against him but he sought to bless them. When they were sick, he mourned, fasted and prayed for them. He blessed his enemies, treating them as a friend and brother, even as a mother. This is not a vengeful man. And yet, he does call for God's vengeance on the very men he sought to bless. This is not inconsistent. We should reach out with kindness to even our enemies, hoping that God would use it to draw them to Himself. But if they will not. If they refuse us and Him, God will take care of that, too.

15 But in mine adversity they rejoiced, and gathered themselves together: yea, the abjects gathered themselves together against me, and I knew it not; they did tear me, and ceased not: 16 With hypocritical mockers in feasts, they gnashed upon me with their teeth.

David did not kick a man when he was down. They did not return the favor. The righteous will not fight dirty but the wicked look for every opportunity of advantage. This sometimes frustrates the righteous, so much so, that those of little faith are tempted to return evil for evil, playing by the rules of the wicked. We see this tendency in politics. But God calls us to a higher standard.

17 Lord, how long wilt thou look on? rescue my soul from their destructions, my darling from the lions. 18 I will give thee thanks in the great congregation: I will praise thee among much people.

David calls upon God and gets a bit frustrated with God's patience. That is no surprise. God is patient but He is not idle. He does not continue to only look on. His waiting is grace and mercy but His actions are wrathful. Let righteous hear it and remember.

19 Let not them that are mine enemies wrongfully rejoice over me: neither let them wink with the eye that hate me without a cause. 20 For they speak not peace: but they devise deceitful matters against them that are quiet in the land. 21 Yea, they opened their mouth wide against me, and said, Aha, aha, our eye hath seen it.

It is okay to ask God to reveal the truth. Enemies sometimes gloat over the trials of the righteous, intimating that the righteous really are not righteous and thus deserve their troubles. This is because they know that they are in the wrong and have wicked hearts and cannot even imagine that a righteous appearing man really is righteous. When the righteous stumble, a wicked man assumes he is just being revealed for being like he is. He cannot comprehend that a truly righteous man will stumble in the Lord's will. But God is doing something much bigger than what the wicked can conceive of. When the righteous have trouble, there is no lack of wicked men to say, "See, I told you he was not so good after all."

22 This thou hast seen, O Lord: keep not silence: O Lord, be not far from me. 23 Stir up thyself, and awake to my judgment, even unto my cause, my God and my Lord.

Again, David calls upon God. David knows the truth. The wicked probably do not know the truth, being self-deceived and even so caught up in their own snares. But God knows and David calls upon God to reveal what He knows.

24 Judge me, O Lord my God, according to thy righteousness; and let them not rejoice over me. 25 Let them not say in their hearts, Ah, so would we have it: let them not say, We have swallowed him up. 26 Let them be ashamed and brought to confusion together that rejoice at mine hurt: let them be clothed with shame and dishonour that magnify themselves against me.

Bold David but not arrogance. We have been taught not to think too highly of ourselves. This is wise. But we ought to think truthfully and honestly. When you are accused of wrongdoing in a particular instance and you know the accusation is false, it is not wrong to call upon God to look and judge between the sinner and the saint. God's righteousness is always perfect. So, when you know you are in a just cause, call upon Him to reveal true justice. It is right for us to ask God to defend His name and the good name of His people. Let not the wicked gloat over God and His people. When God reveals the truth, the wicked will reap shame and dishonor and God's people will be honored.

EXHORTATION

27 Let them shout for joy, and be glad, that favour my righteous cause: yea, let them say continually, Let the Lord be magnified, which hath pleasure in the prosperity of his servant. 28 And my tongue shall speak of thy righteousness and of thy praise all the day long.

Not only is David going to shout for joy and be glad when God acts but so are all those who favor the cause of the righteous. When God vindicates the righteous, the people of God rejoice. This is one way that all the trouble finds meaning. In the end, God's power, wisdom and truth is

revealed. His name is glorified and He makes a distinction between those who are His and those who are real enemies. He blesses the righteous but brings the curses of the wicked down upon their own heads.

We need not be afraid to call out to God and ask Him to act. Of course, we are not perfectly righteous. We are sinners in need of grace ourselves. But the people of God tell the truth and deal fairly. We do not devise evil plans to hurt others. When we know this to be true, then we can call upon God to reveal this truth to the world. This will result in the blessing of the righteous and the cursing of the wicked. When we leave this in God's hands and not take up our cause using the tactics of the wicked, God is pleased and His name is glorified.

So, do what is right. Wait upon God and He will be your salvation.