

I am thankful that this psalm is in Jesus' Prayer Book because it helps me to know what to do with my anger. The psalm's fierce language is not an embarrassment but a blessing, because without it I might be tempted to suppress my feelings instead of venting my hate in prayer.<sup>1</sup> Psalm 109 leads the people of God emotionally as well as ethically. In a fallen and broken world believers will always find it difficult to stand at the right hand of the needy and seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness. The psalmist is under attack for doing good, for obeying the Father's will, and he is suffering for it. Prayer gives him a way to move forward. It pushes him past fear and hate and gives him confidence that the Lord will judge the wicked and save those who depend upon him. This psalm shocks us out of our spiritual lethargy and moral complacency and brings into the real world of good and evil.

It is worth noting that the apostle Peter used the Psalms to justify Judas Iscariot's replacement. Peter argued that "the Scripture had to be fulfilled in which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through David concerning Judas, who served as a guide for those who arrested Jesus." Peter quoted from Psalm 69:25 LXX, "May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it," followed by Psalm 109:8 LXX, "May another take his place of leadership" (Acts 1:16, 20). When the apostles quote a verse from the Old Testament, they often have in the mind the whole context. That may also be true in this case. Judas fits the description of the evil perpetrator in Psalm 109. It is also reasonable to conclude that Psalm 109 in its entirety helped Peter deal with his emotional reaction not only to Judas's betrayal, but to the crowds that shouted "Crucify him! Crucify him!" and to the Sanhedren and Pharisees. Christians can hardly pray Psalm 109 without seeing in the innocent person's suffering "a mirror of Christ's sufferings."<sup>2</sup>

The flow of praise psalms from Psalms 103 to 108 guides the worshiper in Yahweh's covenant love and his faithfulness throughout salvation history. We are encouraged to join in on the thanksgiving and praise, "Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story" (Ps 107:2). Then we come to a confrontational psalm like Psalm 109 that stirs up our adrenal and gets our heart pumping and our mind racing. The psalmist reacts to a group of people within his social sphere who do everything they can to despise and hate him (Ps 109:1-5). In the next section (Ps 109:6-20), the psalmist vents his rage either against the ringleader of the group or against each one of them in his collective group of enemies.<sup>3</sup> The singular voice makes the psalmist's anger specific and personal. Instead of picturing a group of antagonists, the reader sees a person who has vindictively done all of these hateful things.

In the final section (Ps 109:21-31), the psalmist emphasizes his own weakness and dependence

<sup>1</sup> Other imprecatory include Pss 7, 35, 58, 69.

<sup>2</sup> Allen, *Psalms*, 78.

<sup>3</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 389. Kidner writes, "The sudden change from plural to singular, until the plural returns in verse 20, has prompted several interpretations. The simplest is that the 'him' and 'he' are a way of saying 'each one of them'; a not uncommon Hebrew idiom which verse 20 seems to support if it is summarizing the passage." Goldingay, *Psalms*, 279-280. Goldingay sees Ps 109:6-19 as the accuser's maledictions. Allen, *Psalms*, 76-77. Allen, likewise, sees the accused quoting the accuser's trumped up charges and imprecations against his family. But as Wilcock, *The Message of the Psalms*, 159, we have to reckon with the fact that "the apostolic church understood this second section (Ps 109:16-20), like the first (Ps 109:1-5), to be spoken by the righteous against the wicked."

on the Lord's unfailing love. Yahweh's steadfast love delivers him from his accusers and administers justice. The psalmist looks forward to the Lord's resolution and vindication so he can join the great throng of worshipers extolling the Lord.

*Under Attack*

*My God, whom I praise,  
do not remain silent,  
for people who are wicked and deceitful  
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.  
Psalm 109:1-5*

David begins and ends with praise, "My God, whom I praise . . . With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord; in the great throng of worshipers I will praise him" (Ps 109:1, 30). The psalmist's praise is set in sharp contrast to the deceit, lies, and hate speech of the wicked. The only voice missing is the Lord's speech; everything else is a cacophony of hate and accusation. David pleads, "Do not remain silent!" We can empathize with the psalmist. Amidst all the false accusations, deceitfulness, and deception, we too may feel the silence of God. We may even wonder why the Lord gives the wicked such a long leash to spread their propaganda and falsehoods far and wide.

These are not foreign foes but people the psalmist knows well. They ought to be his good friends and fellow worshipers, but instead they are his enemies. They mount a verbal campaign against him. Their menacing tactics include deception, gossip, slander, and ridicule. David feels attacked and hated without cause. His friendship is rebuffed and his good works are despised. His only defense is prayer. He is a man of prayer. And with all the evil attacking him, and with all the dark passion inside of him, prayer is the release that brings him, sinner that he is, into the presence of God. Prayer is the defense that brings the worshiper's just cause into the presence of the most honorable Judge, who alone has the right to judge. "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom 12:19; Deut 32:35).

The skeptic may be inclined to question the psalmist's self-understanding and debate the meaning of friendship and truth, but those who have faced the reality of evil, know how one-sided and clear-cut goodness can be and how obvious and real evil can be. We live in an equivocating age that confuses the meaning and the reality of good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsehood. The whole premise of Psalm 109 is that good is good and evil is evil. The prophet Isaiah said, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light

and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20). The psalmist has no patience with those who debate his definition of hate speech or legitimize falsehood as free speech.

*The Ringleader*

*Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy:  
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 wandering beggars;  
may they be driven from their ruin 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.  
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 blot out their name 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 back on him.  
He found no pleasure in blessing –  
may it come back on 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 against me.*

Psalm 109:6-20

The shift from the plural to the singular, from “they” to “he”, may as we said reflect the Hebrew idiom for “each one of these” but it also may have theological significance. The impersonal, unbelieving world presented as an abstraction evades personal accountability and description. But in the psalmist’s picture, evil wears a human face. Evil is personal and cannot be abstracted from a human being who is perpetrating such suffering. The accuser has responsibilities, achievements, parents, and children. The persecutor has the opportunity to show kindness, aid the

poor, help the needy, heal the brokenhearted. But instead of being and doing good, the evil person loved to curse, found no pleasure in blessing, and embodied hate. He wore evil with pride the way a person wears an expensive suit or a beautiful dress. Evil is nothing if it is not personal. The psalmist knows that there is no such thing as impersonal evil. He knows that all evil must be taken personally.

The psalmist identifies with God's curse against evil. This is a passionate psalm, but David is not nearly as passionate as God is against evil and injustice. Like Job and Jeremiah, the psalmist shares God's passion against evil and enters into the divine case for righteousness. Psalm 109 recalls Job's deliberate response when he got up, tore his robe, shaved his head, and cursed the day of his birth. His curse is a reminder that God defines the good. Likewise, the psalmist refuses to turn a blind eye or a deaf ear to the false accusations and injustices perpetrated by his accuser. God's curse in the Garden says "No" to evil. God puts his foot down and shouts across the creation, across the cosmos, across all time. Sin is sin. Evil is evil. God's curse defines and separates out the good from the evil, life from death.

The psalmist also knows what to do with these dark emotions welling up in his soul – Prayer. Left to himself he'd fight evil with evil. Wouldn't we all?! Even the perception of an unintentional slight or an innocent misrepresentation, has on occasion triggered within us a fury of rage. We are quick to plot revenge and calculate how we can get even. If we are honest the very thought of retaliation brings a blush to our face, because it is such a common emotion. Thankfully, we rarely act on the impulse of our harsh and damning emotions, but they are there and the psalmist has the good sense to pray out his hate to the Lord.

The difference between righteous vindication and mean-spirited vengeance is evident in three ways. The psalmist leaves the judgment of his enemy up to the Lord. He appeals to the agency of the Lord throughout this entire section (Ps 109:6-20) and ends by saying, "May this be the Lord's payment to my accusers" (Ps 109:20). The psalmist's willed passivity leaves the judgment of his foes entirely in the hands of the Lord to hold people accountable, not to his law, but to the Lord's righteousness.

Secondly, the psalmist gives the person up to his own evil devises and strategies. This is a fairly common theme throughout the psalms. The punishment for evil is contained within evil itself. Evil has a boomerang effect. What goes around comes around. The psalmist asks the Lord to give him a taste of his own medicine. "Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy, let an accuser stand at his right hand" (Ps 109:6). "He loved to pronounce a curse – may it come back on him" (Ps 109:17). The psalmist is not asking for anything bad to happen to his enemy that his enemy has not wilfully done multiple times to others. It is as Paul said, "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts. . . . God gave them over to shameful lusts. . . . God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done" (Rom 1:24, 26, 28).

Finally, what looks like cruel and vindictive punishment to westerners is the psalmist's deep appreciation for the social impact and public consequences of evil. Late modern individualism shies away from causing shame and disgrace to fall on an entire family for the actions of one evil

individual. We have trouble understanding why Achan's sin should lead to the destruction of his entire family and possessions (Judges 7:24) or why Israel was commanded to wipe out the inhabitants of the promised land to prevent Israel from copying the Canaanite pagan customs. Thankfully the strategy of the crucified and risen Lord is radically different from the Mount Sinai strategy that came down hard in defense of the law in a temporal and theocratic order, but this perspective helps us to appreciate why the psalmist prayed the way he did. If the judgments requested by the psalmist sound harsh, we should keep in mind the consistent New Testament warning of the final judgment. "During the several minutes that it takes to pray through this psalm," writes Patrick Reardon, "we are brought face to face with the real possibility of eternal loss and reminded that 'it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb 10:31)."<sup>4</sup>

### The Cry of the Persecuted

But you, Sovereign Lord,  
    help 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, Lord my God;  
    save me according to your unfailing love.  
Let them know that it is your hand,  
    that you, Lord, have done it.  
While they curse, may you bless;  
    may those who attack me be put to shame.  
    but may your servant rejoice.  
May my accusers 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 of worshipers I will praise him.  
For he stands at the right hand of the needy,  
    to save their lives from those who would condemn them.

Psalm 109:21-31

"But you," signals a redemptive pivot in this Good Friday prayer (Ps 22:3, 19, 19).<sup>5</sup> We do not hear the voice of Jesus in the David's imprecatory petitions (Ps 109:16-20), but in David's

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<sup>4</sup> Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 216.

<sup>5</sup> Kidner, *Psalms*, 110.

graphic description of innocent suffering we sense “its loudest echo in the experience of Jesus.”<sup>6</sup> We hear the unjustly accused cry out for the help. In his utter weakness, the persecuted one turns to his Sovereign Lord for deliverance. He prayed his fierce imprecations against his powerful accuser in a powerless state of heart-broken weakness, acute physical trauma, social shame, and intense spiritual distress. This is not an excuse, but it explains his righteous state of complete vulnerability and his refusal to fight evil with evil. The psalmist explains his weakness in images that reflect his desperate condition. He is as insignificant as a bug on the sleeve only to be quickly brushed aside. His emaciated body invokes pity and shame from indifferent spectators who offer no help and shake their heads in disgust.

The psalmist appeals to the Lord’s unfailing love. He prays for a great reversal (Ps 107:33-38) to prove to the world the goodness and righteousness of the Lord (John 13:35; 17:22-23). Only the Lord’s blessing can overturn the accuser’s curse and lift up the poor and needy. The psalmist closes with a picture of the Lord standing at the right hand of the needy “to save their lives from those who would condemn them” (Ps 109:31). Spurgeon wrote, “Nothing can more sweetly sustain the heart of a slandered believer than the firm conviction that God is near to all who are wronged, and is sure to work out their salvation.”<sup>7</sup> This image of salvation contrasts with the earlier picture of an adversary (śāṭān) standing at the right hand of the accuser (Ps 109:6). The image invokes the gospel: “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil” (John 3:17-19).

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<sup>6</sup> Allen, Psalms, 78.

<sup>7</sup> Spurgeon, Treasury of David, Ps 109