

Praise in Book II: Lament and Imprecation as the Basis of Praise

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Abstract

In this third session on Book II of the Psalter, Dr. Ted Hildebrandt examines how corporate temple rituals, raw individual and communal laments, and severe imprecations serve as foundational bedrocks for authentic biblical praise. He demonstrates that Old Testament worship is anchored in reality, where cries of despair and requests for divine retribution against enemies serve as a dark backdrop that highlights God's acts of salvation. Through structural shifts in individual Psalms, analysis of Old Testament covenant curses, and New Testament parallels, Hildebrandt shows how committing vengeance to God transforms human suffering into heartfelt adoration and public worship.

Outline

I. Introduction and Overview of Session 03

A. Course Context: Teaching on Praise in Book II of the Psalter

B. Three Core Pillars of the Session:

1. The ritualistic/cultic background of Book II
2. Lament as the bedrock basis for praise
3. Imprecation (cursing the enemy) as the basis for praise

C. The Tripartite Character Framework (Psalmist, Enemy, Divine King)

1. Enemy attacks and plots against the psalmist (devouring, digging pits, lion/serpent imagery)
2. Psalmist laments and pleads to the Divine King
3. Divine King delivers the psalmist, punishes the enemy, and establishes justice

II. The Cultic/Ritualistic Background of Praise in Book II

A. Definition of Cultic Loci in Old Testament Wisdom vs. Psalms

1. Proverbs: Centered in the royal court with sages
2. Historical Books: Centered in royal annals and national history
3. Psalms: Centered on the Temple sanctuary, altar, and sacred liturgy

B. Textual Demonstrations in Book II:

1. Psalms 42–43 (Psalm Pair): Taunted by enemy ('Where is your God?'); remembers leading liturgical processions to the altar on Mount Zion

2. Psalm 68: Detailed description of temple procession (singers out front, musicians, maidens with tambourines, tribal procession led by Benjamin)
3. Psalm 51: Penitential praise amidst sacrifice; contrite heart prioritized over external ritual, ending in righteous sacrifices on Jerusalem's altar
4. Psalm 50 vs. Psalm 51: God's rejection of mere mechanical sacrifice ('cattle on a thousand hills') vs. genuine contrite offerings
5. Psalm 66: Praise in the context of fulfilling personal vows made during distress

III. Lament as the Basis for Praise

A. Genre Foundations (Hermann Gunkel's Classification)

1. Individual Laments (e.g., Pss 42–43, 51, 54–57, 59, 61, 64, 69–71)
2. Communal Laments (e.g., Pss 44, 60 — identified by 'we', 'us', 'our')
3. Praise Hymns (e.g., Pss 47, 65–68)

B. The Structural Shift: From Lament to Praise

1. Abrupt transition from raw honest grief to praise (e.g., Psalm 13)
2. The realism of the Psalter: Exceptions like Psalm 88 (ending in darkness without resolution)
3. Christological significance: Jesus' adoption of Psalm 22 on the cross ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?')

C. Reality-Anchored Worship

1. Critique of the modern 'prosperity gospel' and avoidance of lament
2. Visual metaphor: Lament provides the dark canvas that allows the bright colors of praise to stand out

D. Case Studies in Book II (Lament to Praise Movement):

1. Psalms 42–43: Disquieted soul transformed through hope in God's future deliverance
2. Psalm 57: Surrounded by lions and sharp swords; shifts to cosmic praise ('Be exalted, O God, above the heavens')
3. Psalm 59: Enemies prowling like snarling dogs at night; psalmist sings of divine strength in the morning
4. Psalm 69: Deep sinking waters, gall/vinegar, and isolation; resolves in creation-wide praise and Zion's restoration
5. Psalm 66: National Exodus motif (Red Sea crossing) paired with individual testimony of answered prayer

IV. Imprecation as the Basis for Praise

A. Understanding Imprecation

1. Definition: Invoking severe divine curses or judgment upon malicious enemies
2. The four primary Imprecatory Psalms in Book II: Psalms 58, 59, 69, and 70
3. Distinction between Imprecatory Psalms and widespread imprecatory statements throughout the Psalter

B. Theological Framework: The 'Already / Not Yet' Judgment Model

1. The 'Already' (Past Judgment): Conquest of Canaan (Ps 44), pedagogical function scattering wicked bones (Ps 53), Lex Talionis retributive justice (Ps 57)
2. The 'Not Yet' (Future Judgment): God's cosmic summons and direct warnings of destruction (Pss 50:22, 52:5, 55:23)
3. The Present ('May He'): Psalmist's plea for divine intervention and retributive equity

C. Ethical and Biblical Reconciliation

1. Re-evaluating Jesus' harsh rebukes of religious hypocrites alongside Matthew 5:44
2. New Testament Imprecation: Martyrs under the heavenly altar crying 'How long... until you avenge our blood?' (Revelation 6:9-10)
3. Key Scholarly Resources: John Day (*Crying for Justice*), Chelmer Martin, Eric Zenger (*A God of Vengeance*)

D. Key Functions of Imprecation in Book II:

1. Pedagogical Function: Demonstrates to all humanity that God actively judges the earth (Ps 58:11)
2. Vow to Praise: Judgment of enemies leads directly to public sacrifice and exaltation of Yahweh (Pss 54:6-7, 57:11, 59:16-17, 70:4)
3. Renunciation of Personal Vengeance: Entrusting retribution entirely to the righteous Divine King frees victims from violence (Zenger's thesis)

V. Conclusion and Transition to Session 04

A. Synthesis: Cultic rituals, raw laments, and imprecatory cries together form the robust foundation of true worship

B. Summary of Royal Role: Human king (Ps 72) and Divine King crush oppressors to protect the needy

C. Preview of Next Session: The mechanics of praise (vow, call, cause, place, and modern worship implications)