

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Praise of God in Book II of the Psalter, Session 3: Lament and Imprecation as the Basis of Praise, Podcast Audio Overview

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Okay, let's unpack this. What if, and just hear me out on this, what if the healthiest thing you could do today isn't writing in a gratitude journal? Right, which is basically what everyone tells you to do. Exactly.

What if the healthiest thing is actually writing down a hyper-violent, vengeful fantasy about your worst enemy, and then just handing that fantasy over to a higher power? That is definitely not the standard advice today. No, not at all. I mean, we live in this world of highly curated, almost toxic positivity, you know? Yeah, good vibes only.

Right. You open your phone, and it is just a relentless feed of people living their so-called best lives. And the subtle message is always that if you're sad, or if you're furious, you just need to manifest some good vibes and basically get over it.

Right, just push it down. But what if the ancient world understood something profound about human psychology that we have, frankly, completely forgotten? So today, our mission is to explore this really fascinating lecture by Dr. Ted Hildebrand. On Book Two of the Biblical Psalms, yeah.

Yeah, exactly. We are going to look at how the ancient world used pure, unfiltered rage and profound despair as the literal bridge to mental health and resilience. What's fascinating here is that we are approaching this ancient text not just as theology.

We're looking at it as an incredibly sophisticated framework for human psychology. I love that approach. Yeah.

It's really eye-opening. Dr. Hildebrand's lecture takes us into the ritualistic context of these writings, the actual function of lament, and finally, the highly controversial imprecatory psalms. Which are basically ancient songs of cursing, right? Exactly.

Just pure cursing. And we're going to see how ancient communities didn't suppress their darkest thoughts at all. They actually engineered this massive communal mechanism to process them out in the open.

So to really grasp that mechanism, I feel like we have to start with the physical space where all of this was happening. Because, you know, when I think of reading ancient texts, I usually picture someone sitting in a quiet, dusty library. Or like a very intellectual royal court.

Right. And the source actually points out that the Book of Proverbs functions a bit like that. It's centered in a king's court, very contained, very intellectual.

Yeah. But the psalms? The psalms are an entirely different animal. They are centered exclusively around the temple and the altar.

Yeah. The term scholars use for this is a cultic or ritualistic background. And you really have to strip away the modern idea of a quiet, reflective church service to understand it.

Oh, completely. It wasn't quiet at all. Not even close.

The ancient temple was a place of overwhelming sensory overload. I mean, you had the overpowering smell of burning incense mixed with the metallic scent of blood from animal sacrifices. Wow.

Just visually and aromatically intense. Incredibly intense. Plus the constant deafening noise of thousands of people, livestock, musicians.

It was a full sensory immersive reality. And Dr. Hildebrandt points to Psalm 68 as a literal description of this. Right.

The one with the massive procession. Exactly. It details this huge procession up to the sanctuary.

You have singers in the front, musicians behind them, young women playing tambourines, and it's all being led by the small tribe of Benjamin. It was this overwhelming communal spectacle. It's like the ancient equivalent of being in a packed stadium, right? Like 80,000 people all moving and singing together.

That's a great comparison. Because of the sheer scale of that communal processing space, it physically changes your brain chemistry compared to just sitting alone in your room. It absolutely does.

But reading through Dr. Hildebrandt's notes, a massive tension stood out to me. The source brings up Psalms 42 and 43, and the writer there is in agonizing personal despair. His tears are his food day and night, and his enemies are openly taunting him, asking, you know, where is your God? So my question is, how does that level of deeply isolating, intensely personal trauma fit into a public celebratory space full of tambourines and massive processions? I mean, it feels like those two things should just completely repel each other.

Well, that's the thing. That public space was not designed exclusively for upbeat celebration. No, it was actually a dedicated, structured environment to process trauma.

In the source material, the scholar Herman Gunkel classifies a huge portion of these texts into a specific genre, which he calls the Psalms of Lament. OK, Psalms of Lament. Yeah.

The temple was a place where an individual was fully expected to bring their deepest pain and vocalize it publicly. But it wasn't just a matter of showing up and going through the motions, you know, doing a ritual to magically feel better. It wasn't just a transaction.

Exactly. Dr. Hildebrandt highlights Psalm 51, which is David's famous penitential psalm, written after a massive moral failure. And in the preceding text, Psalm 50, God essentially tells the people, look, I don't need you to feed me your animal sacrifices.

I own the cattle on a thousand hills. Like, I'm good. I don't need your barbecue.

Right. Because an animal sacrifice, if it's devoid of actual inner reflection, it's just a cold economic transaction. It's just paying a fine to the universe.

Precisely. It doesn't change the person at all. But in Psalm 51, David realizes what is actually required is a broken and contrite heart.

A broken heart. Yeah. The broken heart represents actual, painful psychological transformation.

When the individual allows themselves to be shattered by their reality and vocalizes that lament, that raw honesty is what actually mends the fabric of the community. Wow. The outward ritual only works if the inward devastation is real.

Which means the lament is the absolute prerequisite for any kind of joy. I mean, it makes me think of if you've ever dislocated a shoulder. Ouch.

Right. Yeah. The doctor doesn't just pat you on the back and tell you to think positive thoughts.

They have to violently wrench the joint back into the socket. It is an agonizing, intensely painful mechanical process, but it is the required step before the healing can even begin. That is spot on.

And praise in Book 2 of the Psalms operates on that exact mechanical principle. It is anchored in reality. It uses lament and darkness as the necessary backdrop so that the reality of praise actually means something.

It provides the contrast. Exactly. If we look at the structure of these lament psalms, there is almost always a dramatic, violent shift.

Yeah, the sudden whiplash in the text is jarring. I was really struck by Psalm 13. Oh, Psalm 13 is the classic example of this mechanism.

The psalmist is essentially screaming into the void. How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will my enemy triumph over me? It's just desperate. Desperate.

Paranoid. Dark. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, the text shifts abruptly.

Verse 5 pivots entirely, saying, But I trust in your unfailing love. I will sing to the Lord, for he has been good to me. And we see that pattern on repeat, right? Like Psalm 57.

Yes. The writer is describing lying awake among ravenous lions, surrounded by men whose teeth are like spears and arrows. I mean, it's a literal psychological horror movie.

It really is. But then it violently shifts to, I will praise you, O Lord, among the nations. Which, actually, as a quick side note from the source, that specific verse inspired a modern song by a musician named Matt Horsland.

Oh, that's right. Yeah. Or look at Psalm 69, which goes incredibly deep into despair.

The waters are literally up to the writer's neck. They are being poisoned with gall in their food and vinegar for their thirst. And the source points out: These are the exact physical elements Jesus later experienced on the cross.

Yes. But even from the bottom of that drowning reality, the shift happens again. I will praise God's name and song.

But I really have to push back here for a second. Okay, go for it. If you are listening to this right now, and you have been through severe trauma, doesn't that sudden shift feel incredibly cheap? What do you mean? Like a forced happy ending in a movie, where the entire city burns down, the hero loses absolutely everything, but then they sing a little song, and suddenly the credits roll, and we're just supposed to feel good? Well, it absolutely feels cheap if you assume that shift happens overnight.

And that is exactly why Dr. Hildebrandt points out the psychological realism of the Psalms. Because the truth is, the Psalms don't always have a forced happy ending. Thank goodness.

Yeah. The text makes room for the reality that sometimes the shoulder doesn't pop back into place right away. I have to be honest, reading the exception to the rule in the source material made me incredibly uncomfortable, because it violates everything we're taught about how a sacred or religious text is supposed to operate.

You are talking about Psalm 88. Yes. Dr. Hildebrandt highlights this text as an absolute masterclass in unresolved grief.

The psalmist goes down into the depths- I mean, despair, affliction, being entirely engulfed by terror. They are screaming for help, and they simply never come up for air. Never.

Never. The psalm ends abruptly with one of the most devastating lines in all of ancient literature. Darkness is my closest friend.

Period. End of text. Just boom.

Done. Yep. Darkness is my closest friend.

There's no pivot to praise. There's no, but I will trust you. Just pitch black.

And it makes people so profoundly uncomfortable that historically, editors and scholars have tried to artificially link Psalm 88 to the next one, Psalm 89. Just to fix it. Just to soften the blow and inject some hope.

Because human nature abhors a vacuum of hope. Dr. Hildebrandt actually compares this discomfort to the Gospel of Mark. Oh, the ending of Mark.

Right. The original short ending of Mark at chapter 16, verse 8, ends with the women leaving Jesus's tomb in fear and trembling. That's it.

They are just terrified. Wow. And it made early readers so deeply unsettled that later editors actually tried to attach a longer, happier ending just to wrap everything up in a neat bow.

We are just terrified of unresolved darkness. So what does this all mean? Like, for you listening right now, I think there is something breathtakingly validating about this. I agree.

Because this ancient communal framework intentionally carved out physical and textual space for the days or the years when things simply aren't okay. Exactly. The modern prosperity gospel or that good vibes only culture we talked about, it completely fails us because it doesn't allow us to just sit in our fear and trembling.

When darkness is your closest friend, the Psalms say, yes, we actually have a song for that too. You still belong in this community. It completely validates that being a human being involves complex, enduring, and sometimes very contradictory feelings.

You are not required to deny your reality to participate in the community. But that brings us to an even darker psychological reality. It is one thing to be sad or to be grieving a loss or feeling abandoned.

Right. It is a completely different psychological state when you are under active malicious attack by another human being. Yes, it is.

And this bridges us into what is easily the most controversial, shocking part of the source material, imprecation. Imprecation. Essentially, these are the Psalms of cursing.

Dr. Hildebrandt specifically looks at Psalms 58, 59, 69, and 70 in book two, along with others like 109. And these are not just sad songs. No, not at all.

These are raw, violently angry prayers asking God to actively destroy human enemies. And the language is graphic. It is stunningly graphic.

I mean, in Psalm 58, the writer is literally demanding that God break the teeth of the lions in their mouths. And that the enemies melt away like a slug on a rock. You read that, and you just think, how did a revenge fantasy about melting slugs make it into a holy text? Well, it creates a massive ethical tension.

Modern readers often dismiss these verses entirely. They label them as devilish, and they immediately demand to know how this fits with the New Testament mandate to love your enemies. Right.

It feels like a total contradiction. But the source clarifies that setting the Old Testament against the New Testament here is actually a false dichotomy. Dr. Hildebrandt points out that Jesus himself deployed incredibly harsh, condemning language toward his oppressors, the Pharisees.

That's true. And if you look at the book of Revelation, chapter six, verse nine, the text describes the souls of martyred saints under the altar in heaven, crying out in a loud voice, explicitly demanding that God avenge their blood. And Dr. Hildebrandt bridges this ancient text to the modern day with a really harrowing perspective, because, you know, if you are

sitting in a comfortable, safe suburb, a prayer about breaking your enemy's teeth sounds barbaric and unevolved.

Very barbaric. But he asks us to imagine the psychological state of groups who have faced literal slaughter. The source points to recent geopolitical tragedies, like the Islamic State executing 21 Christians on a beach in 2015, or the mass displacement of 100,000 Christians from Mosul and the violence in Syria.

And the point the lecture makes is that for marginalized, oppressed groups watching their families be murdered, those ancient cries for divine vengeance don't sound barbaric. They probably feel viscerally, intimately relatable. Because it is the core cry for equity.

When victims of horrific violence sing these psalms, they are screaming for justice in a world that is structurally designed to ignore them. Here's where it gets really interesting to me. The source brings up the ancient principle of *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation.

An eye for an eye. Right, an eye for an eye. In modern times, we hear that, and we think of unchecked brutality.

But originally, it was a principle of pure mathematical equity. It meant the punishment must exactly fit the crime. It cannot exceed it.

You can't kill a man just because he's tall; you're sheep. Exactly. The source points to Psalm 57, where the writer says, they dug a pit in my path, but they have fallen into it themselves.

It's this foundational human craving for the scales to perfectly balance. And that desire for the scales to balance is entirely natural. But it leads to the obvious friction point of these texts.

If we normalize cursing our enemies and demanding an eye for an eye, are we just perpetuating a never-ending bloody cycle of violence? That's exactly the trap. Because if my enemy breaks my tooth, I pray for God to break his tooth, and then his son prays for my jaw to be broken; eventually, the whole world just ends up toothless and blind. So how did the ancient texts prevent that cycle? Well, the source introduces two vital frameworks to answer this.

First is a theological model called *already but not yet*, which is a concept developed by the scholar George Eldon Ladd. Wait, *already but not yet*? That sounds like a riddle. How can justice be both of those things at the very same time? It's all about how the ancient mind perceived time and divine action.

When singing these imprecatory psalms, the ancient people were looking backward at the past, where absolute justice had already happened. Like the Exodus. Exactly.

Like God delivering them through the Red Sea and destroying Pharaoh's army. That is the *already*. Then they were looking at the future, the *not yet*, trusting that at the end of time, God will ultimately bring down all the wicked and balance the cosmic scales.

So they are trapped right in the middle of that timeline? Yes. They're living in the brutal present tension, surrounded by enemies, basically saying, I know you did it before, and I

know you'll do it at the end of the world, but God, look at what they are doing to me right now. May you destroy them.

Precisely. They are vocalizing the tension of living between the past and the future. And that brings us to the second framework, which is arguably the climax of this entire psychological system.

It's a breakthrough from a scholar named Eric Zenger. He argues that these imprecatory psalms are absolutely not a manual for human violence. They achieve the exact opposite.

I mean, how can praying for someone to melt like a slug be the opposite of violence? Because of the mechanism of transfer. Transfer? Yeah. By placing the hyper-violent cry for vengeance on their own lips, but then explicitly transferring the execution of that vengeance to God, the victim is freed.

They do not have to enact physical revenge themselves. Oh, wow. Zenger says these psalms allow victims to hold fast to their human dignity while completely surrendering the sword.

It is a nonviolent, prayerful protest against violence. You are fully expressing your rage, your trauma, and your demand for blood, but you are handing the weapon to a higher power. That is a staggering insight.

I mean, it's the psychological equivalent of why we created the modern justice system. Exactly. Right? When someone commits a terrible, violent crime against you or your family, your baseline biological instinct is to go full vigilante and just destroy them.

Which is natural. It is. But we as a society ask you to hand your desire for revenge over to the courts.

We ask you to sit in a witness box and testify so that the streets don't just run with blood. Yes. Singing an imprecatory psalm was essentially the ancient way of filing a massive, violent grievance with the ultimate Supreme Court.

It allowed the victim to stand in front of their community and say, I have been horribly wronged, I am furious, and I demand their teeth be broken, but I am letting you handle it, God. That's beautifully put. And by actively letting it go, they retain their dignity, the cycle of physical violence stops, and amazingly, they can actually move forward.

The imprecation itself becomes the necessary bridge to praise. Because once the psychological burden of executing vengeance is transferred off the shoulders of the victim, they can actually breathe again. The poison is out.

The poison is out of their system. They can return to the congregation without a knife in their hand. Let's take a step back and look at the massive journey we've just been on.

We started in the physical sensory overload of the ancient temple, the sights, the sounds, the overwhelming community. We walked through the dark, agonizing valleys of lament, where we learned that it is a mechanical necessity to process pain, and that it's actually okay to sit in unresolved grief, where darkness is your closest friend. And finally, we arrived at this shocking realization that even our most violent anger and our rawest desire for

revenge can be processed safely if we have a mechanism to vocalize it completely and then hand it over to something bigger than ourselves.

I think the core question for you to take away from this deep dive is how you handle your own internal imprecations. Right. When you were deeply wronged, when you feel that burning, acidic desire for retaliation, what do you actually do with it? Do you suppress it, paste on a smile, and hope it'll just magically disappear? Or do you find a healthy, non-destructive avenue to vocalize it fully and then, crucially, let it go? Which brings me back to the thought we started with.

Our modern digital age is driven by algorithms. And those algorithms are largely designed to reward us for two things. Performing a fake, curated happiness so we look good, or engaging in direct, toxic, interpersonal outrage against our enemies in the comments section.

Yeah, that's so true. We either pretend everything is fine, or we digitally tear each other apart. But think about what we just learned.

The ancient world built massive physical temple structures complete with music and community, specifically designed to help people process collective lament and actively transfer vengeance away from the individual. They had a system for it. They really did.

So what would happen if we built spaces today, whether digital or physical, dedicated purely to that same healthy release? A place to honestly say, I am broken, I am furious, and I am handing this over so I don't destroy myself. The fascinating thought. Could recovering that ancient practice of transferring our rage be the missing link to our modern emotional health? Just something to chew on.

Thanks for joining us on this deep dive. And remember to keep asking the big questions.