

Dr. Ted Hildebrandt, Praise of God in Book II of the Psalter, Session 3, Lament and Imprecation as the Basis of Praise, 6-min. Video Overview

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Today, we're going to dive into one of the most beloved books of prayer in the world, the Psalms. But we're not just sticking to the green pastures and still waters. Nope, we're going deep into the dark, violent, and frankly shocking passages of sorrow and rage.

The very stuff that, believe it or not, forms the foundation for its most powerful praise. I mean, right out of the gate you get hit with this? Break the teeth in their mouths, oh God. This isn't some polite suggestion.

It's a raw, violent cry for divine assault. And it's sitting right there in a sacred text. It's the kind of thing that just makes you stop and ask, what on earth is going on here? And that's really the big question for us today.

How can a book filled with some of the most beautiful poetry ever written also contain these brutal prayers for destruction? Well, the answer starts by understanding a powerful and often painful kind of language that fills the pages of the Psalms. So our first clue is a specific type of prayer that you see all over the book of Psalms. It's a genre called lament.

And trust me, it's about a whole lot more than just feeling a little sad. You see, a lament is a gut-wrenchingly honest outcry. It's what happens when the writer feels attacked, abandoned, or just completely overwhelmed.

And instead of hiding it, they hurl all that pain and confusion directly at God. It is the prayer you pray when you feel your entire world is falling apart. Now, what's so wild is the structure you often see in these prayers.

Take a look at Psalm 113. It starts in the absolute depths of despair. How long, O Lord, will you forget me forever? But then, out of nowhere, it pivots.

It completely shifts to praise. But I trust in your unfailing love. I will sing to the Lord.

This whiplash, this sudden turn from raw pain to confident praise, is a key pattern we have to get our heads around. And look, this isn't some rare one-off thing. A huge chunk of the Psalms are laments.

This tells us something absolutely crucial. Suffering isn't an afterthought in this book. It's front and center.

It's presented as the starting point, the necessary experience you have to go through to understand what comes next. But the Psalms are also brutally realistic. You know, not every lament wraps up with that neat little pivot to praise.

Take Psalm 88. It just gets darker and darker until it ends with this absolutely devastating line, darkness is my closest friend. That's it.

End of Psalm. It's this stark acknowledgment that sometimes things don't get better. Sometimes the only prayer is just to survive the darkness.

So you see, lament is the necessary context. It's like the black velvet cloth that a jeweler lays out to make the diamonds sparkle. Without honestly acknowledging this profound, deep pain, any praise that follows would just feel cheap, you know, disconnected from real life.

But this foundation of suffering builds into something even more challenging. Okay, so if lament is the cry of pain, then imprecation is the cry for payback. And this is where the Psalms get really uncomfortable.

We're moving from personal sorrow to actively calling down harm upon your enemies. Let's just be really clear about what we're talking about here. Imprecation is a curse, plain and simple.

It's the act of praying for God to bring disaster, judgment, and total ruin down on someone else. And it is all over the Psalms. And we're not talking about vague little curses either.

They are shockingly specific and brutal. The Psalmist prays for their enemies to melt like a slug, to be erased from existence, to be piled with criminal charges, and to have their own evil thrown right back in their faces. It's visceral, it's violent, and it is deeply unsettling to read.

So this is where you're probably thinking, hold on a minute, how can a text that's part of a tradition that literally commands people to love your enemy contain prayers like this? Is this just primitive unholy rage? Or is there something else going on? To even begin to understand these curses, we have to completely reframe them. You have to see that these prayers aren't just about personal revenge. At their very core, they are a desperate, last resort appeal for divine justice in a world where no other justice can be found.

A really helpful way to think about this is what some people call an already-not-yet framework. So the Psalmist looks to the past, and they see that God has already judged wickedness before, like in the story of the Exodus. Then they look to the future, and they hold onto the promise that God will one day judge all evil.

That's the not-yet. The imprecation then is the desperate cry from the present, from someone trapped in the middle, pleading for God to pull that future, final justice into the right now to stop the evil they're facing. And this really gets to the Psalmist's true motive.

They aren't asking for unlimited, wild vengeance. They're actually appealing to a very ancient legal principle you might know as an eye for an eye. The technical name is *lex talionis*, and it just means the punishment should fit the crime.

It should be proportional. So when they pray for an enemy to fall into the very pit they dug for someone else, they're crying out for a just and fitting consequence. This quote from the scholar Eric Zenger just nails it.

By praying these curses, the Psalmist is actually doing the opposite of taking revenge into their own hands. Think about it. They are transferring the right to vengeance over to the only one they believe can handle it justly, God.

This act of prayer is what keeps them from becoming the very monster they are praying against. So here's the crucial context we have to remember. For an oppressed person with no army, no police force, no court system to protect them, these Psalms were their 911 call.

This was it. It was a formal legal appeal to the highest court in the universe, asking the ultimate judge to please finally intervene and make things right. And this is where we can finally connect all the dots.

These dark cries of lament, these shocking prayers for curses, are not the opposite of praise. It turns out they are the direct cause of it. Just look at this pattern.

The same Psalms that cry out for God to break the teeth of the wicked are the very ones that then erupt into the most glorious praise. Why? Because for the Psalmist, that praise, be exalted, O God, is the natural explosive response to seeing justice finally done and evil defeated. The two aren't just related; they're inseparable.

And these acts of justice, they weren't supposed to be a secret. The Psalms are really clear about their purpose. When the wicked face the consequences of their actions, the whole world is supposed to see it and learn something.

They'll be forced to conclude, okay, surely there is a God who judges the earth. Justice is a teacher. So here it is.

Here's the key takeaway. True, authentic praise isn't some happy, clappy denial of reality. It's not about ignoring pain or injustice or evil.

It is a tough, resilient, reality-anchored response that erupts precisely when that pain is finally heard, when that injustice is finally answered, and when that evil is finally defeated. And that leaves us with one last thought to chew on. We tend to think of praise as something that happens when everything's going great.

But what if the Psalms are teaching us something way more profound? What if the most powerful, the most authentic, the most meaningful praise can only ever be born from staring the world's deepest pain and darkness right in the eye and crying out for the light?