



Women's Bible Study  
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In Anger: Psalm 109  
Gretchen Steer

Last summer we traveled from England to Indonesia via KLM airlines. On the flight from London to Amsterdam, we were traveling with quite a few Dutch businessmen. John and the two girls were sitting across the aisle from me, and when the food came, I started to pass my sandwich over to Hannah. My hand was stretched across the aisle, laden with the sandwich, when the stewardess suddenly moved her cart. This created a chain reaction where the cart bumped my elbow, causing the sandwich to fly through the air and disappear somewhere in the plane in front of me. Because of the cart, I couldn't see where it went, but I could see Hannah frantically mouthing something that looked pretty worried. Unable to do anything, I sat for a few moments until the well-dressed businessman in front of me leaned forward. To my great dismay, I could see there was a dripping sandwich perched on the shoulder of his immaculate suit. As he moved, it slid into his lap and he leapt to his feet, turning around with a furious red face. "Who iss trowing sangwiches?" he roared, looking accusingly at my daughter. I'm sorry, I took the coward's way out as I buried my face in my lap and nearly ruptured something laughing, pretending that I was not related to that family across the aisle. How could I explain? He could hardly speak English. So that was how the Steers nearly created an international incident in the European skies.

Now I could really sympathize with this poor guy. He was minding his own business when suddenly some bratty American throws a sandwich at him. Who wouldn't be angry in that situation, when receiving completely unprovoked ill treatment?

There's an echo of that sentiment, only much stronger and more justified, in our passage today in Psalm 109. **"They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my friendship."** (Psalm 109:4) I've chosen this psalm to speak on today not because I am particularly fond of it – in fact, it is so unpleasant that it raises more questions than it answers – but because it represents a category of scripture that we don't often talk about.

John Piper refers to psalms like this as *"The Verses We Skipped."* [from the article by that name, John Piper, c. Desiring God, [www.desiringGod.org](http://www.desiringGod.org)] These psalms are so disturbing that we often skip over them rather than study them.

So let's begin with

### **I. Some Background on the Psalms**

At the beginning of this series I mentioned that Psalms are different than many parts of the Bible. They are like reading someone's diary – what we might call "a cry from the heart." In that sense many are raw and uncensored, like Psalm 42 which we studied last week. That had verses like **"My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'"** (Psalm 42: 3) Psalm 109 is like that – an angry outburst against unjust and undeserved treatment from people who were thought to be friends.

But Psalm 109 is not just a rant. It falls in the category of "imprecatory psalms".

Now “imprecatory” is not a word which we use much these days. It means “cursing”, and an imprecation is, simply, a curse. By this I don’t mean swearing or bad language, but rather an actual curse describing, or asking for, a specifically bad outcome on another person.

In this context, the imprecatory sections of the Bible describe what will happen to the enemies of God. They follow a specific pattern (often beginning “Let ...” or “May...”) followed by an outcome. **“Let them vanish like water that flows away...” (Psalm 58:7)**

Now this is likely to make us very uncomfortable. It makes many scholars uncomfortable, too, and I should let you know that not everyone agrees that these sections really mean to curse the enemies of God. For example, the footnotes in your Zondervan NIV study Bibles, which I recommend as one of the finest study Bibles available, say “Traditional attempts to isolate a distinct class of psalms called “imprecatory” (and then identify Psalm 109 as the climax of the series) are mistaken.” I think this is one of the few times that I disagree with the NIV study Bible, because the historical commentators agree there IS such a thing as an imprecatory psalm.

So let’s turn to psalm 109, and then answer some questions raised by it, and finish by applying it to you and me as Christians.

## **II. In Anger – Psalm 109**

We can break this psalm into four sections: a lament, a curse, a plea, and a praise.

First,

### **A. A lament (v. 1-5)**

We see the lament in these first five verses:

**“O God, whom I praise, do not remain silent,  
For wicked and deceitful men 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.” (v. 1-5)**

This is not just slander nor broken friendship, but something far more serious – a character assassination in court. We are told that this is one of David’s psalms, but unlike others we’ve studied, it has no tie to specific life events. But we do know that David often experienced the wrath of enemies, and that several times, these enemies had formerly been friends.

Next section is

### **B. A curse (v. 6-20)**

What follows next is more difficult. Verses 6-20 describe the consequences of being evil and unjust towards a righteous person. The notion of curses was familiar territory for the Jews. In the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, we have many cases where a description of blessing is followed by an equally strong description of cursing, if the Israelites are not obedient. Moses said to the people, **“See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse – the blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God.” (Deut.11:26-28)**

It's a theme that is echoed in the New Testament as well. When we follow God's laws and seek to live obediently, we will receive blessing. **"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."** (Gal. 6:9) When we reject God and join his enemies, we will receive judgment and curses. **"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."** (Gal. 6:7-8) The outcome of blessing or cursing has a lot to do with our choice of behavior.

So what we see in the imprecatory section of this psalm is a recognition that God will judge those who reject him and mock his standards. Because David's accuser has betrayed him and repaid his kindness with evil, he can expect to receive similar treatment himself. Here are the main points of this section in v. 6-20:

- An accuser will stand at his right hand. The word "accuser" is a Hebrew word spelled "satan" and it is where Satan's name comes from. (v. 6)
- When he is tried, he'll be found guilty.
- He will give up his place in the community, and also his economic livelihood (v. 8)
- Because he is gone, he will leave his family destitute (v. 9-11)
- His children will experience the consequence of his sin, to subsequent generations (v. 12-13) and his family line will be shamed (v. 14-15)

Why are all these terrible things happening? **"For he never thought of doing a kindness, but hounded to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted."** (v. 16) In other words, he spent a lifetime doing to others what he now deserves himself.

He delighted in cursing others, and now his curses have come back to haunt him:  
**"He loved to pronounce a curse – may it come on him;  
He found no pleasure in blessing – may it be far from him.  
He wore cursing as his garment; it entered into his body like water, into his bones like oil."** (v. 17-18) The accuser's evil way of life was intrinsically part of who he was – it had literally seeped into his bones, this nasty attitude towards people that drove him to curse them.

After these harsh words, come a plea:

C. A plea (21-29)

**"But you, O Sovereign Lord, deal well with 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.  
Let them know that it is your hand, that you, O Lord, have done it. (v. 27)  
They may curse, but you will bless;  
When they attack they will be put to shame,  
But your servant will rejoice.  
My accusers will be clothed with disgrace and wrapped in shame as in a cloak."**

These are vivid word pictures of anguish. When David says his heart is wounded (v. 22) the Hebrew sounds like the Hebrew for curse in v. 17-18, which creates the wordplay “while he lives by cursing, I live with deep inward pain.” (NIV study Bible footnotes)

But look most closely at v. 27. **“Let them know that it is your hand, that you, O Lord, have done it.” (v. 27)** David understands that in God’s sovereign plan times of testing and even anguish may come. He is not besieged by his enemies because God has *forgotten* him; rather, he is in this situation because God is *permitting* him to be tested and tried. This is no different than what Peter tells us in 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 1:7 **“These [trials] have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”** David’s faith WAS proved genuine by the way he suffered, continuing to trust in God to vindicate him, and accepting God’s sovereign right to bring both joy and sorrow into his life.

Finally, David ends with

D. A praise (30-31)

**“With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord; in the great throng I will praise him. For he stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save his life from those who condemn him.”**

Early in this psalm David wrote, **“Let an accuser stand at his right hand.”**(v. 6b) But at the end of the Psalm in verse 31, we read that the Lord stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save his life from those who condemn him. From the accuser, to the savior. That is what we experience when we give our lives to Christ – going from the accuser, to the savior.

But this psalm raises some serious questions for us.

### III. Some Questions

Last summer, when I knew I’d eventually be speaking on the imprecatory psalms, I determined to seek out Dr. Joe Sprinkle, professor of Hebrew at Crossroads College. As it happened we had a choir rehearsal at our home in August. As soon as I got the dessert slapped on the counter I intercepted Joe and sat down to ask questions. I ended up with two pages of handwritten notes. I also ended up being a very rude hostess, as people drifted out the door while he and I sat for thirty minutes engrossed in the subject of imprecatory psalms. So I do want to very gratefully acknowledge Dr. Sprinkle’s help, especially with this next section. Here are three of the questions raised by the imprecatory psalms:

#### *a. Are curses or imprecations found in the New Testament as well as the Old?*

The short answer is Yes. This very psalm is quoted in Acts. Notice that it follows the curse format, beginning with “may” or “let” and then a description of what will happen. And who was it applied to? **Judas.**

In Acts 1:16, Peter stood up and said to the believers, **“Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas,”** (now jump ahead to v. 20) **“For, said Peter, it is written in the book**

**of Psalms, ‘May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it,’ [a quote from Psalm 69:25] and ‘May another take his place of leadership.’” [Psalm 109:8]**

Peter could have quoted from the entire Old Testament. Yet he picked two of the imprecatory psalms, and explains that David was writing prophetically about Judas.

Here are a couple more examples of imprecations in the N. T.

In Revelation 6:10, the souls of those slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained cry out **“How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”** These martyrs are calling for God to exercise his judgment against the wicked. This is imprecation.

When Peter faced down Simon the magician in Acts 8 he said **“May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money!” (Acts 8:20).** Although it’s not immediately apparent to us, this is a curse, an imprecation uttered against an enemy of God.

There is also a surprising number of quotes from the imprecatory psalms in the N.T. Jesus quoted three times from Psalm 69, one of the most problematic of the imprecatory psalms. Remember that many of the psalms prophetically point to Jesus. David, when writing these difficult words, looks down the years to the time when Jesus, the Messiah, will have the right to call down judgment on his enemies – when the whole universe will bow its knee to the coming king, and all other powers will fall.

So while they are not common, imprecations do exist in the New Testament. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking that God is a different person in the New Testament than he was in the Old.

Next question...

***b. Is it Christian to pray imprecatory prayers against the enemies of God?***

We need to start by remembering that David was an Old Testament believer in God – he knew that God would send a messiah one day, but was centuries away from seeing that salvation. What David did understand, however, is that God fulfilled his purposes in the lives of the Israelites, that he was a God who cared about David’s life, and that David could trust God to deliver him from every situation.

So with that background, it seems logical, then, to pray not only for David’s own deliverance, but also to pray *against* those who wanted to thwart God’s purposes – since David believed he was carrying out God’s purposes. These imprecatory psalms are really stating a foregone conclusion about what will eventually happen to God’s enemies, more than they are an expression of revenge or retaliation. Because David preceded Christ, he also did not know about the Christian resurrection and eternal life, and so it must have seemed important that justice was dealt out to evil people in THIS life. We can also see that he extended love to his enemies first, and over a long time. Only when that love is unexpectedly betrayed does David speak in imprecations.

So is that something we should do as Christians? We are sinful and human, so it’s not really our job to try and assess who will fall under God’s judgment, no matter how obvious that seems. Rather, it

is our task to convey the love of Christ to the world and to let God do the judging among those who reject him.

You see, the New Testament has given us a *different* way to resist the enemies of God – the way of love. If we pray for those who persecute us, even when we’re persecuted for following Christ, then we open the way to reconciliation rather than war. **“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility.” (Eph. 2:14)** David’s prayers cried out for the destruction of the enemy of God. Our prayers should cry out for the salvation of the enemies of God, because only through that means will we achieve permanent change and permanent understanding. A few weeks ago we saw the Amish community extend forgiveness to the family of the man who killed six of their young girls. What a powerful witness their forgiveness is in a world that retaliates rather than forgives! So should we pray against the human enemies of God? I think rather that we should pray for them.

A third question:

*c. What did Christ say about the enemies of God?*

Here is how Jesus spoke about the enemies of God: **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean...You snakes! You brood of vipers! How long will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23:27; 33)**

I believe the difference is that Jesus, being God, knew whom would remain God’s enemies and whom would become reconciled with God through the blood of the cross. For that reason it is more appropriate for Jesus to condemn God’s enemies than it is for us.

But there is one more distinction to be made. God’s enemies (meaning human adversaries) are men and women with souls who are not beyond the reach of salvation. To the extent that we can we are bound to forgive them and to pray for their salvation.

But God’s enemy, Satan, is beyond redemption, and for that reason it is appropriate to pray that God will thwart his schemes. These prayers are not imprecatory in the way that David’s psalm was - for one thing, Satan cannot be any more accursed than he already is. As Martin Luther wrote, “for lo, his doom is sure.” But when we pray for the overthrow of Satan we are praying in the will of God, for this very thing is what Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord’s prayer: **“Your kingdom come, your will be done”** and **“Deliver us from the evil one.” (Matthew 6:10; 13)**

So there ARE imprecations in the New Testament – it’s not just an Old Testament thing. But as Christians we have a new tool in our arsenal – Christ’s love. That is much stronger than the tool of hatred. And finally, Christ has already told us what will happen to the enemies of God. Their conclusion is foregone. For that reason we should pray against the one enemy, Satan, because in defeating Satan we are helping bring about the will of God in this fallen world.

Psalm 109 leaves me with one sort of related question. And that is:

#### **IV. What Should We Do With Anger?**

I have a new office mate at work, someone who has only known me for two months. She recently saw me handle a situation where I had reason to be angry about something. She remarked later that I must not get angry very easily, based upon the mild way I reacted. I snorted with laughter, and told her that dealing with anger had been a lifelong challenge for me. In fact, one of my great struggles has been to control my temper. When I was young I must have read the book *Little Women* fifteen times through. There was a scene where Jo learns that her mother, Marmee, has a problem with her temper, and yet she has learned to control it so well that none of her children would ever guess that she struggled. I can only hope that I do as well in front of my children and those who know me. In fact, I'm hoping to be so successful that people will NOT KNOW that I have a temper which needs to be controlled.

You see, it's quite a cop out to say, "I'm just hot tempered" as an excuse for saying hurtful things. By the grace of God each of us can learn to control whatever it is that chronically trips us – whether that's hot temper or pride. If we all had to end up as we started, how awful would that be? But over the years, as we go on with Christ, each of us should begin to see progress in our ability to forgive, our ability to control our mouths, our ability to remain calm rather than irritable.

So let's talk about two different issues of anger. The first is the way we handle

*a. Anger against God's Enemies*

Jann Wright gave an excellent lecture on this topic a year ago, from which I have freely stolen. Against God's human enemies, we need to use the sword of the Spirit – the ability to forgive, pray for, and resist them, understanding that we ourselves were once enemies of God. **"For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life."** (Romans 5:10)

But at the same time, it is not wrong to feel our anger rising at the sight of injustice and hardship. We *ought* to be angry when we see nations full of starving children caused by war and greed. We *ought* to be angry when we see wrong painted as right in the name of political correctness. To ignore the passion of the biblical writers, who express this quite unashamedly, is to try to sugarcoat both human nature and the absolutes of God. There is a right, and a wrong. Humans made in the image of God do react with passion and anger to true wrong.

CS Lewis writes that "In seeing hatred undisguised, I saw also the natural result of injuring a human being." (*Reflections on the Psalms*, CS Lewis, pg. 24) "Their hatreds are the reaction to something. Such hatreds are the kind of thing that cruelty and injustice, by a sort of natural law, produce. This, among other things, is what wrongdoing means." He goes on to point out that if my wrongdoing creates this natural response of hatred in another man, I have compounded the wrong I did him in the first place. First I injured him, and now I take away his innocence and peace by making him hate me.

The imprecatory psalms remind us not to be embarrassed about God's anger towards injustice and cruelty, and not to be ashamed of our own anger at truly wrong things. There are consequences for these acts, and God will judge the perpetrators in this life or the next.

But what about when WE'RE the ones wronged?

Second,

*b. Anger Against Our Enemies*

I think we need to resist anger against *our* enemies. To some extent we can justify anger against God's enemies, but we cannot justify anger against our own.

You see, Jesus gives us a different standard: **“But I tell you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”**

**(Matthew 5:44)** In other words we are to resist the natural impulse to retaliate or even to beg God to retaliate on our behalf. Rather, we are to pray for our enemies and also for the enemies of God. This is not a completely new idea in the New Testament; we hear the same thing in parts of the Old Testament as well:

**“if you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.” (Ex. 23:5)** Justice and kindness isn't something to be reserved for your friends, but is an absolute standard that should be applied to everyone, enemy or not.

I've alluded before to the difficult stretch a few years ago when I and my sister Paula became estranged. To my great mortification, this whole incident has now become a chapter in her latest book. I asked her if she'd at least had the decency to change my name...you know, as in “my sister Penelope” or something equally unidentifiable. But no, the whole world gets to read the story of Gretchen and Paula under their own names. During the worst of this time, though, as we painfully sorted through the roots of a conflict that had been 20 years in the making, I fell back upon my training, gained at much cost in the ministry, in order to react peacefully rather than angrily. You see, dealing with anger DOES get easier over time, as we make an effort to master it. We get better at handling anger as we remember that God will judge and vindicate in an unjust situation; that Christ showed us the way to forgive one's adversaries; and that the Holy Spirit gives us the grace we need to button our lips rather than to explode in anger.

These past few weeks of study have included some heavy subjects – dealing with spiritual depression, pondering the sins which led to Israel's rebellion in history – but what I want you to take away from this psalm is, perversely, joy. Look at verse 31:

**“For he stands at the right hand of the needy one, to save his life from those who condemn him.”** This psalm is for all of us who feel unjustly treated, who have been betrayed by those we love, who are sinking with despair over human relationships. **“He stands at the right hand of the needy one.”** I am that needy one. You are that needy one. And Christ is at our right hand.