

## "How to Take Revenge Like a Christian" Psalm 58

### Introduction

- Each year since 1982 contestants compete in the Bullwer-Lytton literary parody prize which challenges entrants to submit their worst opening sentence of an imaginary novel. This is a real contest hosted by the English Department at San Jose State University. The inspiration for the contest comes from the Victorian novelist "Paul Clifford" who opened his 1830 novel with the immortal words, "It was a dark and stormy night." Listen to the sentence from the 2006 runner-up. Remember, it's supposed to be a groaner. It's supposed to be bad. The author parodied one of the most famous pieces of dialogue from the Clint Eastwood movie *Dirty Harry*.
  - "I know what you're thinking, punk," hissed Wordy Harry to his new editor, "you're thinking, 'Did he use six superfluous adjectives or only five?' -- and to tell the truth, I forgot myself in all this excitement; but being as this is English, the most powerful language in the world, whose subtle nuances will blow your head clean off, you've got to ask yourself one question: 'Do I feel loquacious?' -- well do you, punk?"
- How about the Bible? If there were a contest for the worst sentence in the Bible what passage might come to mind? I'm not thinking of passages that are grammatically awkward or even those that are hard to understand but those passages that when you read them they make you hang your head in shame and say, "You've gotta be kidding, this is in the bible?"
- This morning we are going to talk about Psalm 58. Psalm 58 is an imprecatory psalm. Imprecatory psalms are psalms that call down curses on the psalmist's enemies. I call them "Lord sick 'em psalms." Or, "God, get 'em psalms." As a class, they are the most shocking passages in the Bible. They offend every single modern sensibility. They are politically incorrect. We skip them in our worship. I've never seen a daily devotional on an imprecatory psalm. They don't fit into our theology very well. These are the passages that outsiders pick up on to validate their idea of Christians as hate mongers and I think we, as Christians, are ashamed of them. Even some of the commentators I've read this week were apologetic in their comments. When read out of context they truly are some of the worst, some of the most terrible sentences in the bible. Consider the following...
  - Psalm 35:5-6, 8 *May they be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them away; 6 may their path be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them. 8 may ruin overtake them by surprise-- may the net they hid entangle them, may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.*

- Psalm 69:27-28 *Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. 28 May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.*
  - Psalm 109:8-10 *May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership. 9 May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. 10 May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes.*
- Just think about what the psalmist is praying for a second. May ruin overtake them. May they be blotted out of the book of life. May his children be wandering beggars. Horrible stuff. What are we supposed to do with these parts of God’s word? Do we pray these prayers? Or should we do what Thomas Jefferson did when he cut out all the passages from his bible that he didn’t like? Or is it something in between?
  - This morning, we continue our series through the Psalms called *The Songs of Life*. The psalms teach us how to emote in ways that glorify God. Whether you are happy or sad, elated or depressed, angry or bitter—or any emotion in between—there is a Psalm to match. They are the songs of life. And it is my conviction that Psalm 58 and the other imprecatory psalms are no different. They are as relevant for the Christian faith now as they were when they were written. They are valuable and necessary as parts of our worship. And they remind us of some very important truths. Three weeks ago we looked at how to **gripe** like a Christian. Last week we looked at how to **doubt** like a Christian. This week we look at how to take **revenge** like a Christian.

### Transition

The reason the imprecatory psalms are needed today is because humanity has a problem with vengeance. We are too quick to take matters of injustice into our own hands. We enjoy getting revenge. As the bumper sticker says, “Don’t get mad, get even.” We live in the most litigious society in the world. Why? Because people need to get even, to right wrongs done to them. I came across a ridiculous news story about a husband and wife consumed with getting even. Listen to this Associated Press story out of Lodi, California. “When a dump truck backed into Curtis Gokey’s car, he decided to sue the city for damages. Only thing is, he was the one driving the dump truck. But that minor detail didn’t stop Gokey, a Lodi city employee, from filing a \$3,600 claim for the December accident, even after admitting the crash was his fault. After the city denied that claim because Gokey was, in essence, suing himself, he and his wife, Rhonda, decided to file a new claim under her name. In fact, her claim, currently pending at Lodi City Hall, is for an even larger amount — \$4,800. “I’m not as nice as my husband is,” she said.”<sup>1</sup>

We are not nice people. The vendetta, the tit for tat, the Hatfield-McCoy feud didn’t die out in the woods of Kentucky and West Virginia. It’s alive and well right here in Richland Center. We are not without our share of personally vindictive people. Even the pettiness of not speaking to another person for months or years at a time is a form of revenge. We want to see the other person hurt. And we glorify this idea of the payback.

<sup>1</sup> “Man Sues Himself for Vehicle Damage,” Associated Press, March 15, 2006.

The revenge genre in Hollywood is huge. The Godfather, The Count of Monte Cristo, Kill Bill and Munich are just a few that come to mind. We long to see the actors on the silver screen do what we only wish we could do to our enemies.

- And I believe the reason that God in his wisdom has preserved the imprecatory psalms for us is because in a fallen world where sin reigns, injustices are inevitable. Every day righteous people are exploited. Egregious wrongs are done and God knows that when we witness gross injustices it's easy for our hearts to be consumed with sin and take matters into our own hands. And these psalms teach us not to do that. Vengeance is not ours. Yahweh alone is the supreme judge. These psalms are deep expressions of faith and trust imploring God and his kingdom to break into this world, for the judge of all the earth to make things right. The imprecatory psalms direct our attention away from the injustice around us and force us to abandon seeking our own private revenge and force us to totally surrender to the one who judges righteously.<sup>2</sup> If they have anything to teach us, they teach us that...

### Proposition

- **Vengeance is God's prerogative.**

### Transition

So, let's transition now to Psalm 58 and examine the injustice that caused the psalmist to pray his imprecation. Let me give you a brief tour of Psalm 58 and then I'll share with you six points of application for this psalm and the rest of the imprecatory psalms.

- **Verses 1 and 2** explain to us that the gross injustices experienced by the psalmist were a result of the rulers and leaders of Israel ruling unjustly. Verse 1 begins very sarcastically *Do you rulers indeed speak justly? Do you judge uprightly among men?* With the answer an obvious NO. Verse 2, of course not. *No, in your heart you devise injustice, and your hands mete out violence on the earth.* These rulers, these so called mighty men were, abusing their power, they inventing ways to be unjust and instead of handing out justice they were dispensing violence.
- Look how the psalmist describes these rulers. **Verses 3-5** contain the character sketch of them. *3 Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies. 4 Their venom is like the venom of a snake, like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears, 5 that will not heed the tune of the charmer, however skillful the enchanter may be.* He says from birth they've gone astray and resorted to lies. From birth they've deviated from the straight line of the righteous life. He says their words are like the venom of a snake. There's poison on their tongues and they are as dangerous as a cobra that cannot be charmed—wantonly striking at everything that moves.
- Having painted their characters, **verses 6-9** give us the curses. Behind these curses stand the promise of God's curse in Leviticus 26:15-17 for those who oppose him.

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<sup>2</sup> NIDOT, vol. 3, p. 155.

Remember what God promised to the Israelites if they failed to listen to him? He said to them, *and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant, 16 then I will do this to you: I will bring upon you sudden terror, wasting diseases and fever that will destroy your sight and drain away your life. You will plant seed in vain, because your enemies will eat it. 17 I will set my face against you so that you will be defeated by your enemies; those who hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even when no one is pursuing you.* God has promised curses for those who challenge his authority and it is in this spirit that the psalmist calls on God to bring curses down on these rulers. *6 Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O LORD, the fangs of the lions! 7 Let them vanish like water that flows away; when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted. 8 Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun. 9 Before your pots can feel [the heat of] the thorns-- whether they be green or dry--the wicked will be swept away. 10 The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.* There are five images here.

- He asks that God would break their teeth. Render these rulers powerless by breaking their teeth. They are like lions, God, shatter their fangs. Take all their bite away.
  - He asks that God they would make them vanish, that their strength would dissipate like water vanishing from a dry creek bed.
  - He asks that God would make them like dulled arrows; let them prove as ineffective as archers whose arrows are dull.<sup>3</sup>
  - He asks that their life melt away like a slug dissolving in a trail of slime so that, in the end, they would be no better than a stillborn child.
  - Finally, he asks that as quickly as kindling heats the food pot, that God would sweep them away with the same swiftness.
- Whew. What can you say? The images are graphic. They are hyperbolic—they are extreme because they are uttered with raw intense emotion. Yes, the imprecations are harsh but I don't believe they are uttered in hatred. They are the prayers of a man who is deeply disturbed by the temporary triumph of evil in a fallen world. They are the prayers of one who longs for justice.
  - And that's what the psalmist gets in [verses 10-11](#). After having called on God to intervene and take vengeance, the psalmist rests in God's justice. *10 The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked. 11 Then men will say, "Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth."* The psalm closes on a note of joy, *the righteous will be glad*. No personal vengeance has been taken. No vendetta. No tit for tat. No on-going feud. No bloodthirstiness but rather a delight in justice, a delight in God's triumph over evil. A simple trust in the eternal righteousness of a God who always judges rightly.

## Application

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<sup>3</sup> Tate, p. 87.

- With the words of the psalm still ringing in our ears, let's turn now to **six points of application**. We need to keep these six things in mind so that we can keep this psalm or the difficult words of any of the imprecatory psalms in context.
  1. First, few of us have ever suffered the gross injustices necessary to pray these kinds of prayers. I haven't. But some of us have. And maybe more of us will in the future. So when we pray imprecations they should correspond to the degree of the injustice. In the case of Psalm 58, the injustice was great and so the imprecations, the curses are severely great. We may still pray this way but since the injustices we experience are less, our prayers will be much tamer.
  2. Second, we must keep in mind that in no way do the psalmists ever act upon their feelings. Nor should we. They completely consign matters to God. There is absolutely no effort on their part to take personal revenge and there must be no hint of retribution when we contextualize these psalms to our own situation.<sup>4</sup> As Romans 12:19 says, *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*
  3. Third, we must continually strive to understand how God's love and his justice coexist together. How on the one hand we have these prayers in the OT and yet in the NT we have Jesus' ethic in the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:43-44 *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.* We know that God is not a divided God. "Forgiveness and vengeance, lawfulness and grace, love and wrath are not contradictions within [God]."<sup>5</sup> Nor are the two testaments of the Bible divided and contradictory. In the NT Jesus is not giving a completely new set of commands unrelated to the OT. Somehow these things, these attributes of God go together. My personal feeling is that in times of gross injustice, the imprecatory prayer, when prayed appropriately and with the right attitude, frees us up to love our enemies because we no longer feel the need to take matters into our own hands.
  4. Fourth, since we are on the other side of the cross, we pray these prayers with the final judgment in mind. God will surely answer our prayers for justice when Christ returns! In the words of 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 *All this is evidence that God's judgment is right, and as a result you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are suffering. 6 God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you 7 and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. 8 He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people*

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<sup>4</sup> Bullock, p. 140.

<sup>5</sup> NIDOT, vol. 3, p. 155.

- and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. We wait. We hope. We pray. We trust. And we don't take matters into our own hands.*
5. Fifth, these psalms teach us that we do not hate evil enough. They teach us that if we are indignant about nothing it is a sign of spiritual sickness. "We should be disturbed about sin and aroused for righteousness."<sup>6</sup> The real reason why these psalms so frequently offend our modern sensibilities is because we are too comfortable and familiar with sin.
  6. And finally, number six; one of the striking things about these psalms is that we see ourselves in them. "When we ask for divine judgment on our enemies, we are liable to an identity switch: We are often the enemies! We often times come to an awareness of our own violent sins and our hate, of our own need for confession, and for repentance." Not one of us rides on a righteous high horse. Like David said of himself in Psalm 51:5 *Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.* Or Isaiah. *We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.*<sup>7</sup> Sounds like Psalm 58:3 doesn't it?

## Conclusion

- Maybe the chief purpose of imprecatory psalms is that they reveal our deep need for a Savior. Unable to keep God's commands completely and fully each of us stands under God's curse. *All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law."*<sup>8</sup> As hard as we might try, it is utterly impossible for us to please God and escape His curse. We are all cursed and condemned because of sin—because we've fallen short of the standard God expects us to live up to. That is why Christ had to come. He freed us from the curse of sin. *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."*<sup>9</sup> He became cursed by God on the cross, bearing the full penalty of our curse of sin, so that God might be just and at the same time justify us giving us the righteousness of Christ. But we have to receive this gift by faith. It doesn't happen automatically without our acknowledging it. It must be accepted for what it is--a gift. It must be accepted with gratitude and without expectation of repayment. And we must humbly acknowledge before God that Christ has done something for us that we could never do ourselves and that without Christ's death we are still cursed to die. And if this is our prayer, then there is a promise. *No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. 4 They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. 5 There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever.*<sup>10</sup>  
Let's pray.

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<sup>6</sup> Bullock, p. 141.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 53:6

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 3:10

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 3:13

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 22:3-5