

ON THE WILLOWS WE HUNG OUR HARPS: PREACHING THE LAMENT AND HOPE OF PSALM 137

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ABSTRACT

A genre that poses particular difficulty for preachers is *imprecatory lament*. Psalms that call for vengeance are often a mystery as we plan and prepare to preach. Yet if we are committed to preaching the whole of the canon we must be willing and able to preach these hard and sad texts to our listeners. This paper will explore imprecatory lament for preaching, first considering different lenses for their interpretation and adoption in worship, and then working through one of the most violent, Psalm 137, in a covenantal context as an image of how we might engage these texts for proclamation. We can faithfully preach the terrible beauty of Psalm 137, and other imprecations, by aligning with the psalmist's pain and anger within the context of God's indelible faithfulness. This is timely as we are inundated with news of tragedy, injustice, and pain in areas such as pandemic deaths, racial division and violence, mass shootings, and war. The lament and hope of Psalm 137 gives the preacher something to say in the midst of tragedy as he or she seeks to bring hope to the congregation.

WHEN GOD'S WORD REPULSES: IMPRECATORY LAMENT

The book of Psalms is treasured as the hymnbook of God's people. The church begins much of its liturgy with the reading of a psalm. Many of our hymns and worship songs find their lyrical roots in the songs of the Old Testament. It's a statement on the book's importance that when it's deemed necessary to print the New Testament in such a way that it fit in one's pocket the book of Psalms is the collection from the older part of the book that enduringly makes the cut.

Imprecatory prayer, however, in which the singer prays for harm to come to enemies in protection or vengeance, tests feelings about the psalms particularly and the whole of God's Word by extension. Psalms such as 69, 109, or 137 tend to be ignored or carved up in order to avoid difficult questions about the goodness of God or His Word. Daniel Nehrbass notes that fully 20% of the psalms are either full or partial imprecations.¹ Yet, lines such as "May no one extend kindness to [my enemy], or take pity on his fatherless children," (Psalm 109.12) do not find their way to the Sunday school lessons of Psalms the Singing Songbook.² What can we say when God's Word repulses?

The Problem with Imprecatory Lament

Erich Zenger makes broad observations about the friction caused by imprecatory psalms, and indeed the whole of the psalter, as one considers their adoption in Christian worship and prayer.³

First, he says, the book of Psalms on the whole can cause problems for practical theologies as it contains imprecation, cursing, and the constant presence of one's enemies throughout the whole and not just in select passages. Throughout the corpus even in the

psalms that the church considers most beautiful lurk enemies (Psalm 23, for instance). Nehrbass echos this dissonance in discussing the pastoral task of selecting a psalm to read aloud at the beginning of Sunday worship: "Why is it so difficult to pick one I can read aloud from start to finish without editing out at least a few verses?"⁴ The grit and grime of living in the midst of enemies is the constant subject of the psalms which can make many difficult for worship without the impulse to edit.⁵

A second observation Zenger makes about the restriction or rejection of specifically the imprecatory prayers for worship is that there is a perceived need to protect the reputation of Christianity from repulsive parts of the Old Testament. This has rootedness in an interpretive view that sees an inequality between the New Testament and Old Testament, emphasizing the discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity. The offending psalms are then required "to stand before the judgement seat of New Testament christology and ecclesiology, there to be 'Christianized' or even rejected as partly 'unchristian.'"⁶ These particular psalms are often treated as pre-Christian relics, "and they reflect a type of piety that Christians *as Christians* must overcome and leave behind them."⁷ Once deemed less important, inspired, or "Christian," it becomes easier to edit or ignore stories that repulse, seeking to save the text from itself.

These difficulties highlight the need to engage these texts with an interpretive framework that is able to give both historical and biblical context to them. For the one who holds a high view of scripture, and especially for the pastor shepherding her or his congregation into greater biblical literacy, we must have an answer for why and how to read these troubling texts.

Interpreting the Imprecatory Psalms

Surveying the interpretive history of the imprecatory psalms Nehrbass has identified no less than 13 different ways of reading the texts to answer the difficulties raised above and others.⁸ We can look at four broad streams of interpretive thought focusing on the practical question of how the texts are to be used in preaching and worship. Two related lenses them either excise these texts from our worship or baptize them for acceptability. A more extreme reading that seemingly justifies the fears that lead to the first two approaches occurs when one weaponizes the biblical text irresponsibly. A fourth approach allows the writers to speak out of their unfiltered pain within the context of covenant.

Approaches that Excise or Baptize

Two broad readings of the imprecatory psalms (and other difficult canonical texts) make a practice of either excising the offending portions or baptizing them. Christopher Hays sums these lenses saying, "There are two common ways of getting rid of a biblical passage one doesn't like: one can refuse to read it, or one can 're-read' it."⁹ When confronted with the question of whether these songs can be used in Christian prayer and worship one camp acknowledges the passages are terrible and therefore unsuitable for worship, the other affirms scripture is suitable for worship and that therefore the passages are not as terrible as one might think they are.

Leaning toward a refusal-to-read, Bernard Anderson makes the observation: "It is surely proper to question whether all 150 psalms should be retained in Christian worship, including these troublesome passages, or whether the Psalter should be censored at those points that seem to be inconsistent with God's revelation in Jesus Christ." He goes on, "Two of them—Psalm 69 and especially 109—are almost impossible to use in Christian worship."¹⁰ This inclination to make selections for worship from the nicer parts of the psalms is evident when one surveys books of worship from differing ecclesiastical traditions. Zenger acknowledges that in his own Catholic tradition the words of the imprecatory psalms were either changed in order to be more palpable, verses removed from particular psalms, or entire psalms taken out of the liturgical readings altogether.¹¹ Nehrbass makes the same observation in comparing the United Methodist Hymnal, the Revised Common Lectionary, and the Episcopal Sunday Lectionary.¹²

Related is the practice of baptizing, or "re-reading," the imprecatory prayers. Methods here are diverse. Walter Kaiser insists that the author of Psalm 137 did not really want violence to befall Edom and Babylon. Against appearances, the psalmist is praying for the Messiah's kingdom to not be "trampled underfoot by the arrogant despisers of those who currently hold that office and throne."¹³ Spurgeon and Augustine made the prayers allegorical. Others consider them pre-New Testament and therefore primitive and immature, superseded by Christ and written in language that "is sub-Christian, . . . out of place in the new age governed by the commandment of the Sermon on the Mount."¹⁴ John Calvin argued that at least some of the psalmists were only speaking of a reality over an eschatological horizon, with Matthew Henry identifying the cursing spoken as indicative of God's eschatological judgment upon those that persecute the church.¹⁵

This is not to say that these interpreters offer us nothing by way of understanding the psalmists' words.¹⁶ These readings do, however, come with a cost. Ignoring the texts may work towards covering the symptom but does nothing to cure the perceived problem that the texts in fact exist. As Hays notes, "since [these psalms are] in the Psalter—rather than, say, Numbers or Chronicles—readers tend to find [them] anyway."¹⁷

Re-reading as allegory diminishes the voice of the author in favor of the subjective perspective of the reader. Particularly problematic may be approaches that relegate these texts to a lower status than the New Testament (or even other psalms), viewing them as pre-Christian and as exhibiting an ethic inferior to later, more highly developed revelation. This particular attitude may reflect an overweening Modernity rooted in a myth of progress, as well as a surviving strain of the Marcionism.¹⁸ Significantly, these commitments raise "problems for those who see continuity in the theology of the Bible, since it is inspired by a coherent God who does not change."¹⁹ Further, there is a lurking undercurrent of anti-Jewish bias identifiable, if not in the interpretations themselves then in the potential consequences of them, when a constructed hierarchy casts Jewish thought as primitive and Christian thought as superior. Finally, it is untrue that the imagery or sentiments raised in the imprecatory texts find no parallel in the New Testament. As Hays notes, "what will a church that cannot face Psalm 137 make of the harder teachings of Jesus, with their furnaces and lakes of fire, their wailing and gnashing of teeth?"²⁰

Weaponize

Another way to read these psalms is to adopt them as justification for vengeance. David Augsburger recounts two instances of the use of Psalm 109 in such a way that reinforces the instinct to remove or ignore these imprecatory texts. In a high-profile incident that made its way into court, a Navy chaplain invoked the words of Psalm 109 to curse a Jewish agnostic rival, calling the wrath of God to come upon him and his family. The Jewish man then “received numerous death threats, had swastikas painted on his house, had his windows shot out and animal carcasses left on his doorstep.” In another instance it was reported that a member of the Kansas state House of Representatives cited the psalm to colleagues, concluding “At last – I can honestly voice a biblical prayer for our president [Obama].”²¹

Weaponizing any portion of scripture against another should be an impetus for the preacher to refuse to excise or ignore difficult texts. In a vacuum of orthodox biblical interpretation there is opportunity for misinterpretation or manipulation that can be damaging, inspire violence, or advocate oppression.

Allow Them to Stand

A fourth stream of interpretive thought seeks to allow the psalmists’ words to stand in all their terrible depth, preserving their place in prayer, worship, and preaching. Nehrbass names this a Covenantal framework as it seeks an understanding of the psalms within the covenantal life experience of God’s people.²² At its core, this lens holds that these are prayers of God’s people crying out for God to be true to Himself in keeping His covenantal promises, acting in accordance with His own character as just.

John Day advocates that these psalms be preserved in practical theology today:

...the imprecatory psalms have a place in the New Testament church [on the basis] (a) that they root their theology of cursing, of crying out for God’s vengeance, in the Torah—principally in the promise of divine vengeance expressed in the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:1-43), the principle of divine justice outlined in the *lex talionis* (e.g., 19:16-21), and the assurance of divine cursing as well as blessing in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen.12:2-3); and (b) that this theology is carried largely unchanged through the Scriptures to the end of the the New Testament (Rev.15:2-4; 18:20), thus buttressing its applicability to believers today.²³

The psalmists have a consistent covenantal theology that, in the face of injustice, tragedy, and pain, appeals to the same God who swore by Himself that He would fulfill His promises to His people. Included in these promises are “the prosperity of God’s people, judgment of the wicked, blessing of the righteous, and that God would be slow to anger, and abounding in love.”²⁴ Within a covenantal context the psalms are centrally about God.

There are several aspects of this lens that commend it. It holds Old and New Testaments together, allowing the author to speak and allowing the reader to hear the raw nature of his speech. The approach accounts for imprecatory language in the New Testament (Galatians 1:8-9; Revelation 6).²⁵ This framework acknowledges that imprecation is not

simply a pre-Christian problem to overcome, it is rooted in God's character as faithful to His promises, especially for justice.

Additionally, this mode of reading acknowledges that there is indeed hatred and anger in the psalmists words, that these emotions arise from suffering violence, oppression, and injustice, and the proper place for these emotions is in God's presence. Enemies exist, and the desire for wrongs to be righted and for wrongdoers to be punished is acceptable for God's people. When one moves too quickly in removing, judging, or allegorizing the anger and pain felt at injustice and violence, very real victims are left behind both then and now. There is an appropriateness in one's anger toward those committing infanticide, the rapist, the school shooter, slave trader, sex trafficker, perpetrator of racial violence (individual/s and systems). To diminish the words of the psalmist is also to diminish the experience of the oppressed on the whole. This is a point that those not oppressed, and/or the oppressor, will often miss.

This view, against those who would weaponize these texts, importantly observes that the psalmists who pray these imprecations do not engage in the acts that they seek from God. There is a deep dependence in these prayers upon God to be true to His own character and fulfill the promises God's people would expect God to fulfill. The prayer is for God to act, not a call to action.

These texts in their context then, may inspire a practical theology that frees the reader to feel the depth of pain and anger inflicted by violence and injustice, pray against their instigators, and trust the coming of justice to God rather than take the work of vengeance upon themselves.

INTERPRETING AND PREACHING PSALM 137

Even while one might adopt an exegetical lens that allows the psalmist's words to stand the question still remains of how might these texts be used in worship. What place do these imprecatory laments hold in the preaching calendar? The balance of this paper will look at Psalm 137 through the Covenantal lens offered above, and then offer observations for preaching this lament.

An Overview of Psalm 137

Space here does not allow for a thorough exegetical treatment of Psalm 137.²⁶ What follows is a sketch focusing on the psalm's historical and canonical settings, as well as the practical theology of the singer.

Historical Setting: Prayer of The Oppressed And Powerless

Psalm 137 begins with some of the most beautifully haunting imagery in the hymnbook of God's people and ends with some of the most disturbing. The psalm is a communal lament structured in three stanzas. It is unique among the psalms as it announces its specific location and time of writing: Babylon in the time of the exile. Israel has been carted off hundreds of miles from home, Jerusalem, the city of God and the seat of God's very presence. The psalm is written out of the devastation of a people who have suffered

God's judgment for their idolatry and are now conquered and powerless in the mocking presence of their oppressors.

The first stanza sets out the people's predicament. Defeated, they sit by the canals of Babylon, enslaved by their conquerors who demand that they sing for them the songs of Zion. In protest the musicians have taken their harps and hung them in the trees. It's an act of protest by a powerless people. They possess no power to change their situation but they will not give their oppressors this indignity. If they sing the songs of Jerusalem it will not be in Babylon for the Babylonians.

The second stanza serves as a call to remember Jerusalem and, ultimately, to remember God. The singer boldly pledges the loss of skill as a musician if they forget Jerusalem and assimilate into the body of this foreign land. This is a witness against self. The singer will lose his very identity if he betrays this fidelity to God.

The final stanza prays the imprecation to God for justice according to the covenant that God has made with His people. The Babylonians, with the help of Edom, had decimated Israel and ensured the debilitation of the next generation by killing the nation's children.²⁷ The singer has composed this song out of the deep trauma of a war in which he witnessed infanticide against God's people. In response the words are penned "...blessed shall be he who repays you what what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (vs. 8-9, ESV). The song concludes with this curse prayed against a national enemy who had harmed the whole of God's people.

Canonical Setting: Plea for Covenant Fidelity

Reading verses 7-9 outside the context of God's covenant and law yields shock at the naked brutality of the request, especially on the present side of the Sermon on the Mount. Within covenantal context, however, interpretation shifts to the psalmist's hope. Here, as with other imprecatory psalms, the context lies in God's covenant promises for justice to be done.

"The basis on which the psalmist pleaded for such horrid retribution, though interlaced with emotion, is not the vicious fury of bloodthirsty revenge but the principle of divine justice itself," observes Day. In the text are the marks of God's own words in His foundational covenant with Abraham, and the principles of justice codified in the law given to Moses. When the psalmist is calling out for God to "do to them what they did to us," he is calling for God to be faithful to God's covenant words, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse," (Genesis 12:3). For the author the very character of God demands that He bring justice to the imbalance inflicted by the Babylonians. It is notable that *how* God will respond in fulfilling His covenant is only God's privilege. While the psalmist's request is within the scope of the covenant, it is God who will decide how and when justice is ultimately allotted.

Practical Theology: Surrender to God

As the psalmist's pain comes to intersection with God's covenant promises the practical outworking of his theology comes to life. His appeal out of powerlessness and oppression is for God to act. While one understandable act in the face of unimaginable tragedy such

as witnessing the infanticide of one's people is to abandon all faith in a good and loving God, the singer here has instead found his way forward in God's promise for justice. This is a deliberate faith response to the theodicy question, "*Si Deus, unde malum?*" While the words themselves reflect the repulsiveness of the acts that inspired them, central is the singer's hope in this hopelessness that God would act for justice.

The psalmist and the nation are far from home and taunted by their oppressors, powerless to effect meaningful justice in a cruel land (vs. 1-3). The singer invokes a curse upon himself if he were to forget Jerusalem and by extension God (vs. 4-6). In response he prays for God to act according to His own character and fulfill His promises of judgment and justice against the enemies of His people (vs. 7-9). As a communal lament that responds to the affliction of the whole of God's people, then, the call to the people is to remember and call upon God's presence and promise even while wounded and far from home.

Preaching Psalm 137

What, then, might this psalm (and other imprecatory prayers), say to God's people in this present moment of God's story? And how might the preacher take this "song of violence *par excellence*,"²⁸ into the pulpit for proclamation and worship?

With its elevation of trauma, violence, oppression, and injustice, Psalm 137 comes to life now, in a moment of the story punctuated by trauma, violence, oppression, and injustice. We are living in the midst of a global pandemic that has claimed millions of lives and continues to do so. The United States is facing a reckoning over racial injustice and systemic racism that has come to the surface after historical wrongs have been newly captured in cell phone videos of black men and women being killed, such as George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown Jr., Eric Garner, and too many others. Further in the US, this moment of the story finds forces such as white nationalism battling for political power, with factions of the church too often adopting a nationalistic aspiration alongside these forces. Acts of terrorism across the globe populate the news, school shootings continue with legislators seemingly unable to pass meaningful legislation to prevent the next one, and systemic religious genocide is ongoing against Muslims in China, Myanmar, and elsewhere.

Rooted in the deepest pain and tragedy and deliberately confronting it with God's covenant promise for justice, the singer whose harp hangs in a tree may have something to say to God's people. I'll offer four considerations for preaching Psalm 137, and psalms like it.

Choose the Occasion

While the psalmist has something to say to God's people right now and these texts are appropriate for worship, it's important to choose the occasion we bring these words for proclamation. Important here is to respect the depth of pain suffered by the writer, refusing to trivialize his suffering by applying the words to any and every perceived hurt. It is appropriate to pray and preach for the plans of the wicked to be frustrated and justice to be leveled against them. It is not always the appropriate occasion to do so.

While I don't propose to simply list occasions in which this text is appropriate for worship like a Book of Worship does for weddings and funerals, considering the occasion of Psalm 137 as a communal lament is notable. The sin addressed was inflicted upon the whole of the nation, the injustice widely suffered. Day suggests this communal nature of Psalm 137 is distinct from Psalm 109, which serves as a curse against a personal enemy, or Psalm 58, which curses a societal enemy.²⁹ This particular psalm may be most appropriately preached in response to large-scale tragedy, injustice, or violence, which crashes into us all.³⁰

Wise discernment will allow the psalmist to speak into present-day pain and injustice in such a way that taps into our emotional core, and which leads us into God's presence as our highest and only hope for justice and relief.

Allow the Tragic to be Tragic

It is important to allow the author to speak about the tragedy that has befallen God's people without editing or softening his language. Preach verses 1-9; refuse to stop reading at verse 3 or 6. Surveying published sermons on the psalm reveals a large number that never attempt to make it to the end. This may be uncomfortable for the preacher, but it is faithful to the author and preaching isn't a comfortable calling.

Allowing the author to speak through the sermon out of raw pain and suffering has a number of effects. It respects the text as the account of a very real event, a moment in time that actually happened as opposed to objectifying the text as a container from which to squeeze a disembodied meaning. The psalmist's moment is an event in time and giving the author a voice remembers and mourns his tragedy. It is in the pain of his moment that the singer is pressed closer to God's character and presence and it is often in our own moments of deepest pain that we find a deeper hope in Christ.

In this sense especially we must refuse to ignore or dilute these texts, or to ignore or diminish the experience of violence, oppression, and pain today. If we cannot in church talk about the experience of God's people with infanticide, the very raw and real anger and hatred they felt toward the murderers, and the very nature of God which guarantees justice, we cannot hope to address the experience of our people with rape, racially motivated violence, the murder of innocents in an elementary or high school, or any number of radically tragic events.

On the other side, the preacher cannot use the language of shock for shock's sake which, again, would trivialize the author and his words. Instead, she or he would embody a pathos and empathy that reflects honestly the tragedies of both God's people then, and God's people now.

Consider the Oppressed and the Oppressor

Psalm 137 has at its core the relationship between the oppressed, the oppressor, and the God of covenant and justice who stands between them. God speaks both to the oppressed and the oppressor in this song. When reading and preaching this text, the psalmist's revelation of the perspectives of the oppressed and oppressor invites reflection on how we engage with one another today.

The psalmist, by virtue of his experience, is the oppressed. He is powerless to effect any real change or justice, and has been at the mercy of oppressors who have shown no mercy. The oppressors in the song simply mock the oppressed and take delight as those who witness but who never must experience that pain because of the power that they wield. Seeing this dynamic is an invitation to consider the experience of the oppressed and powerless, and to consider whether and in what ways we occupy roles as oppressors and power wielders.

Much of the preaching on Psalm 137 that gives voice to the final verses originates in communities that have most suffered oppression. Hulisani Ramantswana reads Psalm 137 alongside South Africa's "Struggle Songs" against apartheid. He presses against interpretations that minimize the experience of the psalmist as ignoring "colonial dynamics involved in the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor, the colonizer and the colonized, which continually pushes the oppressed into the zone of non-being."³¹ Nehrbass insists that the question of whether the imprecatory psalms can be voiced in worship today can be most appropriately answered by the victims of violence. He surveys Latin American liberation theologies which see in Psalm 137 an eschatological hope for deliverance and align with the psalmist's cry for the righting of wrongs. The words of the psalm were taken up by Frederick Douglas in 1852 in his sermon "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?," decrying slavery and calling for justice.³²

Examining the pain and perspective, the cry and the hope, of the psalmist opens the oppressed to hope in a God who swears by Himself to bring justice. Truly listening to the psalmist can also reveal that pain to those who can not readily see it. For those in a position of privilege the cry of the oppressed may go unnoticed because they simply do not have to encounter the same struggles or injustices. Privilege unexamined can perpetuate oppression creating more oppressors. An example of this dynamic was expressed recently by faith and political commentator David French. Discussing the rising murder rate in the United States French noted the cultural divide that makes it difficult for a meaningful conversation about justice to occur at a political level:

...if people of faith are to be concerned about justice (and they are!), then justice is rarely more immediate and important than when confronting both the scourge of crime and the tragedy of excess enforcement and mass incarceration. Compounding the challenge [for justice], the class of Americans most engaged in politics (disproportionately white, educated, and well-off) are often the least impacted by crime. They're less likely to feel either the effects of crime or the effects of stepped-up law enforcement. Thus we often find ourselves talking *about* communities rather than *with* communities and making mistakes accordingly.³³

The words of the psalmist invite us to consider ourselves and our own place in God's story. For those who have suffered generational, communal oppression, leading to present suffering and anger, the psalmist invites them to cry out to God who has promised justice. For others, the psalmist invites them to consider whether they are involved in creating or perpetuating events or systems that cause pain, to consider God's disposition towards injustice, and turn towards working with God in the direction of

justice. As discomfoting as it may be, the psalm asks us to consider where we, our churches, our communities stand in relation to the oppressed and the oppressor.

Preach from this Side of the Cross

The psalmist looked out of his pain back to God's words to Abraham and to His people through Moses. In our moment of the same story we look back upon Christ's cross as the reference point for our understanding of God's covenant with us, our experience of suffering, and the promise of full justice and recompense at the eschaton. The cross does not change the meaning of the psalmist's words, as some interpreters might insist. But, it does influence our experience of those words as they intersect with God's people today.

Christ is the mediator of a new covenant in which His people are invited into relationship with God through the forgiveness of sin, atoned for in Christ's death and resurrection. At the cross we come into the presence of a suffering God who has entered into the pain and injustice of His people, both feeling and bearing the weight of humanity's sin. The cross reveals that God knows the pain of the psalmist who has witnessed the infanticide of His people, He has entered the pain of the victim of rape and violence. God suffers with communities experiencing racial bigotry and economic injustice. The psalmist was sure of God's presence in exile. At the cross we can be sure of His presence in suffering right now.³⁴

Simultaneously, the resurrection gives us hope that the life, justice, righteousness, and equality that we seek are right now coming as God's Kingdom overcomes the world from Christ's cross until His return. We see new creation proleptically present in the resurrected Christ. God's people in this moment of His story are invited to bring their suffering to the crucified God and there be given, assurance that the world will be put to rights, hope for life, for righteousness, for renewal. The psalmist was able to count on God to be the one to act. On our side of the cross we see that God has acted, and promised to continue to act. In response to suffering we preach Christ crucified and the hope of resurrection.

Psalm 137 can lead us to this hope, and so we preach the lament and terrible beauty of the psalm by aligning with the author's pain and anger within the context of God's indelible covenant faithfulness.

NOTES

1. Nehrbass lists: 5, 6, 7, 10, 17, 25, 28, 31, 35, 40, 54, 55, 56, 58, 59, 68, 69, 70, 71, 74, 79, 83, 94, 109, 119, 129, 137, 139, 140, 143. He notes that this listing is somewhat subjective, yet each of the psalms listed display some measure of imprecation. Daniel Michael Nehrbass, *Praying Curses: The Therapeutic and Preaching Value of the Imprecatory Psalms* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013), 122.

2. Psalty, for those unfamiliar, is a blue anthropomorphic book, existing as both animated and live action, that has been teaching children the Bible in church children's programs for 35 years. See, www.psalty.com.

3. Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 1-23.

4. Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, 1.

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5. Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 13. Zenger argues that violence and revenge are not sub-motifs but part and parcel of the psalms.
 6. *Ibid.*, 13.
 7. *Ibid.*, 14. John Day describes the accusation more simply: the imprecatory laments express “a morality consonant with the Old Covenant but inconsistent with the New.” John N. Day, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159 (April-June 2002), 166.
 8. Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, chapter 2.
 9. Christopher B. Hays, “How Shall We Sing? Psalm 137 in Historical and Canonical Context,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 27 (January 2005), 36.
 10. Bernard Anderson, *Out Of The Depths: The Psalms Speak For Us Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 70.
 11. Zenger, *A God of Vengeance*, 26.
 12. Hays, “How Shall We Sing?,” 122.
 13. Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Hard Sayings Of The Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988), 175.
 14. Anderson, *Out Of The Depths*, 70.
 15. Nehrbass’ survey of literature at this point is thorough and impressive. See, *Praying Curses*, chapter 2.
 16. For instance, Anderson’s observations about the imprecatory laments highlight the care with which they must be handled. Kaiser helps us to rightly see Christ as a part of the horizon of interpretation.
 17. Hays, “How Shall We Sing?” 36.
 18. The Modern myth of progress is discussed thoroughly in J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used To Be: Biblical Faith In A Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995).
 19. Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, 29.
 20. Hays, “How Shall We Sing,” 37.
 21. See David Augsberger’s Introduction to Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, ix. Beyond the Psalms, Matthew Rogers has highlighted in a sermon addressing the events of September 11, 2001 a letter written to the Chicago Tribune in which the author used another piece of scripture as a rallying cry for violence. The letter stated, “It’s time for revenge, not justice. Terrorists do not deserve the justice of a civilized society. An eye for an eye might be appropriate. Better yet, let’s make it two eyes for an eye.” This makes the judicial principle a call to violent action, unintended by the *lex talionis*. Matthew Rogers, *God’s Message To A Nation Under Attack*. <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/god-s-message-to-a-nation-under-attack-matthew-rogers-sermon-on-god-in-the-hardships-41691?page=1&wc=800>. Accessed September 1, 2021.
 22. Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, 43-49.
 23. Day, “Imprecatory Psalms,” 168.
 24. Nehrbass, *Praying Curses*, 44.
 25. Day’s treatment of these texts is insightful. “Imprecatory Psalms,” 183-185.
 26. There are several significant exegetical treatments of Psalm 137. See especially Daniel Simango, “A Comprehensive Reading of Psalm 137,” *Old Testament Essays* 31:1 (2018): 217-242; Hulisani Ramantswana, “Song(s) of Struggle: A Decolonial Reading of Psalm 137 in Light of South Africa’s Struggle Songs,” *Old Testament Essays*, 32:2 (2019): 464-490; David Stowe, *Song of Exile: The Enduring Mystery of Psalm 137*, (Oxford: Oxford, 2016), as

well as the many commentaries on the Psalms such as James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994).

27. There is nothing to suggest that the singer's words are hyperbole. The imagery is not foreign to the Bible. 1 Kings records the act in 8:12 and 15:16. Hosea speaks of the act in judgment against Israel (13:15). Isaiah speaks this punishment against Babylon (13:16). Day notes that "siege warfare in the Ancient Near East; was frighteningly cruel; and the most brutal and all-too-common practice of conquerors was the dashing of infants against rocks in the fury and totality of war's carnage," "Imprecatory Psalms," 173-174.

28. Zenger, *God of Vengeance*, 47.

29. Day, "Imprecatory Psalms," 175.

30. I have preached this text on one occasion in an effort to make sense of the September 11, 2001 terror attacks, and on another in response to terror attacks in France in 2015. The second sermon is reprinted in my book, *Preaching Through Time: Anachronism As A Way Forward For Preaching* (Eugene: Cascade, 2017).

31. Hulisani Ramantswana, "Song(s) of Struggle," 464.

32. Accessible at: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/what-to-the-slave-is-the-fourth-of-july/>

33. David French, "The Mistakes We Cannot Make Again," <https://frenchpress.thedispatch.com/p/the-mistakes-we-cannot-make-again>, September 26, 2021.

34. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).