

## **I Hate You in Jesus' Name**

*How To Think About the War Psalms in the New Covenant Era*

*By Steve Lehrer*

I often go to the Psalms for comfort in times of trouble and encouragement when I am weary. The words of the Psalmist often echo the cry of my own heart. But there are some Psalms that trouble me. They trouble me because they seem to amplify what I consider the sinful desires of my heart. These troubling Psalms are called the War Psalms or the Imprecatory (cursing) Psalms. These divinely inspired passages of Scripture are full of cursing, hatred, and desire for revenge. Psalm 109 is perhaps the best example of an imprecatory Psalm. In this Psalm David tells us that he has been sinned against. He has been stepped on and stabbed in the back. He has been unjustly persecuted. His prayer to God concerning his enemy is as follows:

Appoint an evil man to oppose him; let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is tried, let him be found guilty, and may his prayers condemn him. May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes. May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor. May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children. May his descendants be cut off, their names blotted out from the next generation. May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD; may the sin of his mother never be blotted out. May their sins always remain before the LORD, that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth. (Psalm 109:6-15).

David is praying for his enemies. David is asking God to make his enemy suffer. Notice that David not only prays for bad things to happen to his enemy, but also to his enemy's entire family! On the face of it, this sounds more like a rant from an embittered Mafioso than a holy prayer from one of God's servants. The final piece of the prayer is the most amazing. He asks God to always remember his enemy's sin. The blessing of the New Covenant, the cross of Christ, is that God no longer remembers our sin (Hebrews 8:12). David is asking God to send his enemy to hell! There are many times that I am tempted to pray the words of David in Psalm 109 concerning my enemies, but then I read the New Testament and I have to pause and consider whether my actions are God-honoring. Here are just two New Testament passages that cause me to call into question the practice of cursing my enemies:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:38-45).

We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:19-21).

Why did God put his divine stamp of approval on David's vengeful prayer in Psalm 109 and tell us that having such a heart towards one's enemies is sinful in the New Testament? Jesus tells us that we are to "pray for those who persecute" us. Could Jesus have had a "Psalm 109 prayer" in mind when he said those words? Can we righteously pray to God that our enemies suffer, that their families suffer and that they be sent to hell and be punished by God for all eternity? Can we say to our enemies, "I hate you in Jesus' name?"

### **Holy Hacking and Loving Your Neighbor**

The problem we have is that it seems that there are two entirely different sets of ethics in Scripture—one for the Old Covenant and one for the New Covenant. This is not exactly accurate but there is some truth in it. You see, in the wisdom of God, the Israelites were not obligated to love their enemies.<sup>1</sup> In fact, they were commanded by God Himself to hate their enemies. Look at God's holy command to the Israelites to destroy their neighbors:

However, in the cities of the nations the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance, do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you. Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshipping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 20:16-18).

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<sup>1</sup> An objection may be raised that they were to "show love to the alien in their midst as they were once aliens in Egypt" (Exodus 22:21; Deuteronomy 10:19, etc). This is true, but it seems that a differentiation should be made between "alien in their midst" to whom they were to show love, and their enemy whom they were to destroy.

One of the ways the Israelites were told to stay away from sin was by hacking their neighbors to death! They were to slaughter every man, woman, and child that God told them to kill. It would have been a bloody mess that would make the goriest horror movie seem like an innocent Saturday morning cartoon by comparison. Imagine that God himself commanded the Israelites to actually kill all of the inhabitants in a given city, from babies to old ladies! Consider Joshua's holy hatred for his enemies. He was faithful to the Lord in his execution of God's orders:

The LORD said to Joshua, "Do not be afraid of them, because by this time tomorrow I will hand all of them over to Israel, slain. You are to hamstring their horses and burn their chariots." So Joshua and his whole army came against them suddenly at the Waters of Merom and attacked them, and the LORD gave them into the hand of Israel. They defeated them and pursued them all the way to Greater Sidon, to Misrephoth Maim, and to the Valley of Mizpah on the east, until no survivors were left. Joshua did to them as the LORD had directed: He hamstrung their horses and burned their chariots. At that time Joshua turned back and captured Hazor and put its king to the sword. (Hazor had been the head of all these kingdoms.) Everyone in it they put to the sword. They totally destroyed them, not sparing anything that breathed, and he burned up Hazor itself. Joshua took all these royal cities and their kings and put them to the sword. He totally destroyed them, as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded. (Joshua 11:6-12).

If that isn't an example of hating your enemies, I don't know what is. At the command of God, Joshua and the men of Israel killed everyone in the city of Hazor and burned the city to the ground. That is definitely not something you do to someone because you love him so much! Consider another example from the Old Covenant era. In 2 Chronicles, God rebukes King Jehoshaphat through Jehu the seer because the king has been too kind and loving to the wicked:

When Jehoshaphat king of Judah returned safely to his palace in Jerusalem, Jehu the seer, the son of Hanani, went out to meet him and said to the king, "Should you help the wicked and love those who hate the LORD? Because of this, the wrath of the LORD is upon you. There is, however, some good in you, for you have rid the land of the Asherah poles and have set your heart on seeking God." (19:1-3).

The wrath of God was on Jehoshaphat because he did not have the holy hatred for some of his neighbors that God's holy law commanded him to demonstrate.

You may be thinking, "I know the Israelites were commanded to love their neighbors somewhere in the Old Testament." You are right! In Leviticus 19:18 Moses records God's words: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." This verse should sound familiar since it is found in both the Old and New Testaments. "Love your neighbor as yourself" is a cornerstone of law in the New Covenant era, but it is originally a command from the Old Covenant. In the Old Covenant era, the neighbors the Israelites were obligated to love consisted only of their fellow Israelites. This is clear from the wording of the command: "Do not seek revenge or bear a **grudge against one of your people**, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." We have seen that the Israelites were not commanded to love their Canaanite neighbors. When this law is repeated in the New Covenant era, the old commandment becomes new. Because of the coming of Jesus and his work on the cross, we have a new mission that changes the face of the old commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves forever. Christ turns the spotlight on this command in Luke chapter 10 and shows the change that had taken place with His coming:

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

In reply Jesus said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. 'Look after him,' he said, 'and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.'

<sup>6</sup>"Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"

The expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him."

Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:25-37).

When the expert in the law asked Christ "Who is my neighbor?" he was not sincerely seeking to know and obey God, but rather to "justify" his cruel behavior towards others. Yet the question is a good one given Israel's divinely sanctioned bloody history with its neighbors. Christ's answer is that you are supposed to be "a neighbor" to whomever you come across. This is the polar

opposite of God's command that we looked at in Deuteronomy 20 where he says, "...do not leave alive anything that breathes. Completely destroy them—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites—as the LORD your God has commanded you" (v. 16b, 17).

Christ is not misinterpreting the Old Covenant command. He is bringing the command into the New Covenant phase of God's plan of redemption where it is given changes appropriate to what God is doing. You see, the people of Israel were the (unbelieving) people of God *gathered*.<sup>2</sup> **Israel's enemies were God's enemies.** That is they knew who God's enemies were and God directed them to hack them down. In the New Covenant era, this law to love our neighbors is very different. Our "neighbors" consist of anybody and everybody we bump up against. We (believers in the New Covenant era) are the (believing) people of God *gathering*.<sup>3</sup> **God has not told the church who His enemies are.** God has told us to go out and work at reconciling everyone—both His enemies and His future friends—to God rather than reconnecting them with the dirt! Our mission is to *gather* the true people of God from throughout the world by loving everyone as Christ loved us.

We must remember that David was an Israelite. When he prayed the War Psalms, he was praying as an Old Covenant Israelite who had a different holy definition of "neighbor" and a different holy command for behavior towards his enemies than you and I have today. Israel is not the church and the church is not Israel. God used Old Covenant Israel differently in His plan than He is using the church. This helps us understand how the command to love your neighbor could be so radically different under these two different covenants and for these two different peoples. In the New Covenant era, we are to love not just our closest neighbor, but also our furthest enemy. It is now an incredibly sinful act to live like an obedient Old Covenant Israelite. If I were to go and hack down my pagan neighbors because of their wicked false religion, I would be rebelling against God and breaking his law. But it was a God-glorifying act for an Israelite to do that very same thing in the Old Covenant era. Killing someone would be breaking the New Covenant law to love my neighbor. But my Old Covenant Israelite counterpart would not be violating Leviticus 19:18 in any way if that neighbor happened to be on God's hit list. When wicked idolaters persecute me and even threaten me with bodily harm, I am commanded by God to seek to bless them and do good to them,<sup>4</sup> while an Old Covenant Israelite would have been in deep rebellion against God if he acted the way I am commanded by God to act today. This radical difference between God's command regarding neighbors and enemies for Old Covenant Israel and His command for the church today, should get us a step closer toward understanding the war Psalms.

### **Some Biblical Prayers Become Unbiblical If We Pray Them**

Many people approach Scripture, especially the prayers in Scripture, as generic prayers that exist simply to stir our hearts to love God more. Using the words of Scripture to stir your heart to greater love towards God is commendable. But this must be done with great care because some prayers in Scripture are inappropriate for you and me to pray. Sometimes there is a context to the words or a position that the person praying holds that may make it inappropriate and even dishonoring to God for you and me to pray. An example of this is Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began (John 17:2-5).

I cannot pray this prayer as if it is my own. I am not God's Son in the same way Jesus is. I was never granted authority over all people to give eternal life. I did not have glory before the world began. God did not give me a people out of this world. For me to pray this prayer as if it was my own, would not only be inappropriate, it would be the unspeakable sin of a mere man making himself equal with God. Jesus could do this because He is the God-man. I am a terrible sinner saved by God's amazing grace. I am in this prayer, not as the speaker, but as one of the people God the Father gave to Jesus Christ. I will never be the person praying this prayer, but I will always be the person being prayed for by Christ in this prayer.

Consider Psalm 72 for a moment. This Psalm was written by Solomon—King David's royal son. In this Psalm Solomon is praying for himself and for his kingdom:

Endow the king with your justice, O God, the royal son with your righteousness. He will judge your people in righteousness, your afflicted ones with justice. The mountains will bring prosperity to the people, the hills the fruit of righteousness. He will defend the afflicted among the people and save the children of the needy; he will crush the oppressor. He will endure as long as the sun, as long as the moon, through all generations. He will be like rain falling on a mown field, like showers watering the earth. In his days the righteous will flourish; prosperity will abound till the moon is no more. He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. The desert tribes will bow before him

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<sup>2</sup> During the Old Testament and the Old Covenant era you do not find any clear teaching on evangelism or the taking of the gospel to the world. There were no missionaries in Israel and there was no great commission.

<sup>3</sup> It was a big difficulty for the disciples to grasp this concept. The very idea that the gospel was to be given to non-Jews was revolutionary (Acts 15:6-11). For Paul and John, this idea of the universality of the people of God was of paramount importance. See Ephesians 2:12-18 and Revelation 5:9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:14-21

and his enemies will lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of distant shores will bring tribute to him; the kings of Sheba and Seba will present him gifts. <sup>1</sup>All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him (Psalm 72:1-11).

Solomon was the king of the nation of Israel. I am not. His job was to exercise God's judgment over the people of Israel, mine is to call people, Jews and Gentiles, to be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). His father was promised an everlasting dynasty of which he was a part (2 Samuel 7:8-16). Neither my father nor I have any such promise. This Psalm is Solomon's prayer, not mine. It has profound theology within it that affects me as it relates to my Lord Jesus Christ, but this prayer of Solomon is not and cannot be my prayer.

Although not all prayers in Scripture should be taken on the lips of the saints as their own, these biblical prayers are still inspired by the God of heaven and earth and they were godly prayers for those who originally spoke them. This raises the question, "Were the war psalms meant to be prayed by all of the saints or is their 'pray-ability' limited by the position of the person who originally prayed them?"

### **Am I David, King of Israel?**

The first thing you should ask yourself as you flip open the Bible to the book of Psalms and find yourself reading a war Psalm is, "Am I David, King of Israel?" If you answer "yes" to this question, please call your local mental health department and direct them to your house for a pick-up, because you now officially belong in a padded room under professional medical supervision. But, for the rest of us who answer "no" to this question, it brings us back to Psalm 109 and the fact that David, not you or me, is the one who was praying. Let's consider how unique the position really was that God placed David in. David, unlike you and me, was the great King over Israel. He was God's anointed (*messiah* or *christos*) who not only brought political power and prosperity to the Kingdom of Israel, but was promised an everlasting kingdom by God Himself:

"Now then, tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.' " 'The LORD declares to you that the LORD himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me ; your throne will be established forever.' " (2 Samuel 7:8-16).

If you read through the prophets you will find an expectation of a future David, or son of David. This Davidic person is to be the restorer of the fortunes of God's people. He is seen as the great hope of Israel:

" 'My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd. They will follow my laws and be careful to keep my decrees. They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children's children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people. Then the nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.' " (Ezekiel 37:24-28; cf. Jeremiah 33:15-26).

As you read your Bible in the New Covenant era, these and many other hopeful passages about a restoration of David's Kingdom complete with David himself shepherding his people are somewhat obvious road-signs pointing to the Messiah that was to come. He was the King of God's chosen people; he brought them into an era of unprecedented peace and prosperity; and God made a covenant with him to make his family an everlasting dynasty. This points to Jesus in the New Testament who is said to be the King of His people; He brings spiritual peace and spiritual prosperity to His people; and God made a New Covenant with Christ making Him an everlasting priest and King over His people.

### **Putting the Puzzle Together**

So far we have found that not all of the prayers in Scripture are appropriate for you and I to pray. There are several reasons that this is true. First, if it is a prayer uttered by an Israelite concerning his enemies, then we must take into account that the Israelites had a different divinely commanded way to behave toward their enemies than we do on this side of the cross. Second, often there is a particular historical circumstance behind a prayer that we do not share with the person who originally uttered the prayer. Finally, the office of the person praying may be of such a different character that he can say things to God that you and I cannot. These have all been somewhat separate thoughts that have given us some answers, but we are now in the position of a

child who has separated the pieces of a puzzle by color and shape but has yet to begin putting the puzzle together. Our job now is to put the pieces of the puzzle together to make one coherent picture.

### **If I'm Not David, Then Who Is? The Jesus Connection**

The New Testament tells us that Jesus is the long awaited Davidic King about whom the prophets spoke. It is not that Jesus is actually David, but that David and Jesus have a typological relationship—David prefigured Jesus. The prophets gave us hints and shadows but the writers of the New Testament give us clear testimony that Jesus is in fact the son of David that was to come. In Luke 1:31-33 the angel Gabriel is speaking to Mary and in this wonderfully hopeful passage in which he promises Mary a son, he clearly tells her that Jesus is the long awaited son of David and the eternal ruler that was to sit on the throne of David: “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.” The David/Jesus connection in the New Testament is hard to miss. It is either directly stated as it was by the angel Gabriel above, or it is indirectly stated by taking the words of the Old Testament that applied to David and applying them to Jesus. A clear example of the latter is found in Acts 4 where the disciples take Psalm 2 and quote it as if it is speaking directly about Jesus and the events surrounding his death:

On their release, Peter and John went back to their own people and reported all that the chief priests and elders had said to them. When they heard this, they raised their voices together in prayer to God. "Sovereign Lord," they said, "you made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and everything in them. You spoke by the Holy Spirit through the mouth of your servant, our father David: " 'Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen (Acts 4:23-28).

Notice that the disciples understood David, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to have penned Psalm 2 in such a manner that it actually spoke of Jesus (“his Anointed One”) Herod and Pilate (“Kings of the earth...and rulers”) and the gentiles (“the nations” that “rage”). As we consider Psalm 2 for a moment we will find that the disciples used Psalm 2 in a very surprising and enlightening way that will ultimately inform us of how we are to read the war Psalms. Psalm 2 is a coronation Psalm. It celebrates the installation of a king over Israel. Here are the first 7 verses:

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain?<sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One.  
"Let us break their chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters." The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath, saying, "I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father (Psalm 2:1-7).

This Psalm has an historical setting. When the Psalmist (probably David) wrote about the nations, he thought of Philistia, not Rome. When he wrote about “kings of the earth” he most likely thought of the kings of the Moabites or the Arameans, rather than Herod and Pilate. The nations and kings that were conspiring were the enemies of Israel in David’s time and the Anointed One was David himself. What led the disciples to believe that this Psalm spoke about the installation of Jesus as Lord and King through his resurrection? What led them to interpret this Psalm as one that referred to the enemies of Jesus who contributed to his crucifixion? I believe that what led them to this interpretation was that they understood “the Jesus connection”—that David prefigured Christ and therefore David’s situation in Psalm 2 also prefigured Christ’s.

### **Inspired Application of the War Psalms**

Now we are ready to examine how the writers of the New Testament applied the war Psalms. In the first chapter of the book of Acts, the disciples are in the upper room waiting and preparing for Pentecost, they conclude that they need to pick a new apostle to fill the spot Judas left. As they turn to this task they cite two war Psalms to describe their situation and support their actions:

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (a group numbering about a hundred and twenty) and said, "Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus—he was one of our number and shared in this ministry." (With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out. Everyone in Jerusalem heard about this, so they called that field in their language Akeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) "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,' and, " 'May another take his place of leadership.' Therefore it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection." (Acts 1:15-22).

The first quotation “May his place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in it” is a quotation of Psalm 69:25. Psalm 69 is a Psalm of David. David is praying that God would rescue him from his many enemies that are seeking to kill him. Verse 25 is in the midst of the climax of the Psalm when David is fervently praying that God would take action:

May the table set before them become a snare; may it become retribution and a trap. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever. Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents. For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt. Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous (Psalm 69:22-28).

In this Psalm, King David is praying that God would wipe out his enemies. He prays that the result of God’s wrath being poured out on his enemies would be that they would no longer be around to live in their land or dwell in their tents. The disciples grab this verse from Psalm 69 and rather than seeing themselves in the place of David and therefore being able to pray this Psalm as if they were the speaker, they understand “the Jesus connection.” They see that David prefigured Jesus as the great messianic king. They see David’s words concerning his enemies as applicable to Jesus and his enemy, Judas Iscariot.

The disciples do exactly the same thing with the second quotation that is drawn from Psalm 109:8. The context is essentially the same as that of Psalm 69. It is, once again, a Davidic Psalm in which David is praying that God would pour out His wrath on David’s enemies. David wants God to wipe his enemy (and the family of his enemy) from the face of the earth and an added bonus would be that God would put another person in his “place of leadership” so that it would be as if his enemy never existed! The disciples take this cursing prayer of David and apply it to the archenemy of Christ, Judas Iscariot, and use it to support their action to appoint another Apostle. The disciples are reading the war Psalms uniformly in the light of the special typological relationship between David and Jesus. Their application makes perfect sense once we understand “the Jesus connection.”

Let’s take a look at just one more example of a New Testament author using a war Psalm. In Romans 11, Paul quotes Psalm 69:23. Paul quotes this Davidic war Psalm in the midst of making the point that much of Israel has rejected the gospel and only a tiny remnant of Israel has ever embraced God’s saving grace and mercy:

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened, as it is written: "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day." And David says: "May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever." (Romans 11:7-10).

There is something remarkable about Paul quoting a Davidic war psalm in this context. David was the king of the nation of Israel. When he penned these words about his enemies, he was speaking about the many nations that surrounded his nation that had their swords drawn and bows bent, ready to destroy Israel. When David prayed he prayed as the king and representative of the nation of Israel and so his prayer is on behalf of himself and on behalf of Israel. His enemies were Israel’s enemies. In David’s prayer, Israel is the good guy. Now, when Paul quotes this prayer of David, he uses these cursing words to apply to Israel. According to Paul’s interpretation, the nation of Israel is the enemy that gets cursed! How are we to make sense of this?

Once again, the only way the New Testament use of the imprecatory Psalms makes any sense is if we see them in the light of the new and final King and the new and final Kingdom He ushered into power with His sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection. David was the king of ethnic Israel, Jesus is the king of spiritual Israel (Romans 9:6; Galatians 3:29). David prayed that God would curse the physical enemies of the physical kingdom of Israel. Paul interprets David’s words in the light of the new King and Kingdom to mean that the spiritual enemies of Jesus get cursed. Paul understands that the Jews who have rejected the Gospel are the enemies of Christ and His Kingdom and therefore David’s words apply. The pieces of the puzzle now fit together and we can see the limited but extremely important application of the war Psalms.

### **So, When Can I Curse My Enemies?**

Charles Spurgeon, the amazing 19<sup>th</sup> century pastor and thinker also wrestled with the war Psalms. His point of view is perhaps the most popular view people hold concerning the application of the war Psalms. In his usual colorful way, he tells us how and when he believes these Psalms might be prayed:

I cannot forbear the following little incident that occurred the other morning at family worship. I happened to be reading of the imprecatory psalms, and as I paused to remark, my little boy, a lad of ten years, asked with some earnestness: “Father, do you think it right for a good man to pray for the destruction of his enemies like that?” and at the same time referred me to Christ as praying for his enemies. I paused a moment to know how to shape the reply so as to fully satisfy his inquiry, and then said, “My son, if an assassin should enter the house by night, and murder your mother, and then escape, and the sheriff and citizens were all out in pursuit, trying to catch him, would you not pray to God that they might succeed and arrest him, and that he might be brought to justice?” “Oh, yes!” said he, “but I never saw it so before. I did not know that that was the meaning of these psalms.” “Yes,” said I, “my son, the men against whom David prays were bloody men, men of falsehood and crime, enemies to the peace of society, seeking his own life,

and unless they were arrested and their wicked devices defeated, many innocent persons must suffer.” The explanation perfectly satisfied his mind.<sup>5</sup>

Hopefully, after having examined so much Scripture, this explanation does not “perfectly satisfy your mind.” Spurgeon seems to be saying that we can curse our enemies as David did, when our enemies are *really bad*. We can pray for vengeance when we want our enemies brought to justice. We can pray that God would get our enemies when they kill our mothers or when other innocent people might suffer. There are several problems with this point of view. Spurgeon’s view does this not deal with the severity of cursing we find in the war Psalms—that the Psalmist wants his enemies to go straight to hell along with their families. It also does not deal with the radical nature of the New Testament command to love our enemies.

We need to return to the key questions posed in the beginning of this article: “Can we curse our enemies as David did without violating the command of Christ? Can we say to our enemies, ‘I hate you in Jesus’ name?’” The answer is an emphatic “No!” We are neither the King of theocratic Israel nor are we Jesus, King of kings and Lord of lords. We are not in the position of Old Covenant Israel or king David. To fight against the nation of Israel and David was to become an enemy of God. But our enemies are not necessarily God’s enemies. We no longer know who the eternal enemies of our Lord are, so we cannot pray or even quote the war Psalms in order to apply them to our enemies today. There will be a time in the future when Jesus will come in judgment. At that time His enemies will be revealed and judged. It is His job to bring his enemies to light and to justice, not mine. Until He is ready to destroy His enemies, it is our job to follow Jesus in His love of His enemies and in His humility and suffering—not in His righteous wrath.

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<sup>5</sup> James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons From the Imprecatory Psalms*, (Philipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Co., 1991) 90. This is one of the few books on the imprecatory psalms. It takes a different view than that set forth in this article. But since there is such a lack of written material on the issue, it is a book worth buying.