

Psalms, X

Psalm 111:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; / all who follow his precepts have good understanding. / To him belongs eternal praise.” There is reference to this in Job 28:28, and Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, and 31:30. And there are many other proverbs that stress the fear of the Lord as the beginning of wisdom, the first step in wisdom, and knowledge of the holy One as understanding. As we study Proverbs and the wisdom books, we will see that they are deeply theological. We have seen this already in Proverbs 3:5-6, which does not say, “Trust in your knowledge, because you have gained a great deal of it,” or “trust in your education because you have many degrees.” Rather it says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart / and lean not on your own understanding; / in all your ways acknowledge him, / and he will make your paths straight.” That is curious in a book that is bent on imparting instruction. Over and over, the father says to the son, “My son, give heed to your father’s instruction. Listen to what I am teaching you. Learn this.” And yet, in the end he says, “Do not lean on your own understanding.” Ultimately, the wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord. What is the fear of the Lord? It is not merely being terror-stricken by the Lord, although if like Isaiah we were to see the Lord lifted up that would appropriately strike us with awe and fear, as people who have unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips. But, in Christ, we need not fear Him in that way exactly. The fear of the Lord is more of an awesome respect and giving Him the honor He is due.

Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, / and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” The word there for “knowledge” is the very same root word as we had in Proverbs 3:5-6, “In all your ways, acknowledge Him.” Acknowledging God is not passive, saying, “God is sovereign; I acknowledge Him and I will conduct my life my way and just trust that He will take care of me no matter what.” Rather, to acknowledge God is to recognize that He is worthy of our pursuit and study. If He has spoken, we are to hear. If He has given us a book to read, we need to read and understand it. In Psalm 9 the very same word as used in Psalm 3 is translated “knowledge.” “Knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” I think we could expand that and say, “Knowledge and acknowledgement of Him, recognizing His centrality, is the beginning of wisdom.” It is wonderful to know that if you know God, your eyes will begin to open to understanding. I have seen in small children wisdom that seems to be lacking in people who teach at prestigious universities. These who have the highest degrees say things that even a wise, believing child can see through, process, and provide a good answer to. We can take delight in knowing God. And as we acknowledge Him, He will give us wisdom for life. He will make our paths straight. This does not mean there will not be problems. But it means He is able to bring us through those problems.

In this lecture we will begin studying a difficult topic, the imprecatory psalms. I want you to listen to or read these psalms and think about how these words strike you. How do they make you feel? What do they cause you to think? Listen to the following psalms:

Psalm 35:4-5: “May those who seek my life / be disgraced and put to shame; / may those who plot my ruin be turned back in dismay. / May they be like chaff before the wind, / with the angel of the LORD driving them away.”

Psalm 58:6-8: “Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; / tear out, O LORD, the fangs of the lions! / Let them vanish like water that flows away; / when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted. / Like a slug melting away as it moves along, / like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun.”

Psalm 69:27-28: “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 83:13-15: “Make them like tumbleweed, O my God, / like chaff before the wind. / As fire consumes the forest or a flame sets the mountains ablaze, / so pursue them with your tempest / and terrify them with your storm.”

Psalm 109:6: “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.”

Psalm 137:8-9: “O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, / happy is he who repays you / for what you have done to us— / he who seizes your infants / and dashes them against the rocks.”

These are imprecations in the psalms. These are the calling down of curses on the enemy. How does that make you feel? If we are not made a little uncomfortable by these, then we really are hard people. Or perhaps we have greater understanding than might be anticipated at this stage. What are we going to do about this? Let us think a little about the problem. One thing Chalmer Martin does is minimize the quantity. He reminds us that it is not exactly correct to talk about imprecatory psalms; it is better to talk about imprecations within the psalms. One of the passages we just read was from Psalm 69, which we read in another lecture under the rubric of messianic psalm. There are many messianic aspects in Psalm 69, and yet within it are also these imprecations. But it is not an imprecatory psalm. Rather, there are imprecations within the psalm.

The three psalms that have the highest concentration of imprecations are comprised of a total of 95 verses. Of those 95 verses, only 23 of them are imprecations. Thus only about a quarter of the verses in the most highly concentrated imprecatory psalms are actually imprecations. Therefore, in a sense, we need to draw back and say, “Wait a minute. These imprecations are not all over the place. They are limited in quantity.” In the end, the issue is not so much the limitation of quantity, but rather the magnitude of the quality in the sort of frightful and terrifying sense of what is said. “Happy is he who repays you for what you have done— / he who seizes your infants / and dashes them against the rocks.” That is an image we do not even like to have in our minds. What do we do with this?

There have been a number of proposed solutions, and I want to mention a couple of them before moving on to some other ideas. One solution is to say simply that this is a language of the emotive heart. David, to quote Martin, was a man of passions, as we are. These utterances of David, a man like us, are sinful. But the sin was one for which much excuse can be made. Not everything is commendable, as the Bible records. No more is the religious expression always to be endorsed as pleasing in God’s sight. This is Martin’s argument, and there is some force to it. Not everything in Scripture is endorsed by God. Think of the comments of Job’s comforters. The fact that those words are recorded in the Bible does not mean that they are endorsed in a propositional sense by God Himself. They are recorded because they needed to be recorded. Martin responds this way, “While we may make excuse for harsh words said in the heat of anger, we cannot excuse the embodiment of the same words in permanent literary form. Imprecations of one’s enemy should be repented of, not written down for others to read.” In the heat of anger we may invoke a curse on someone, but that is not something we should write down and pass along to our children and say, “Read this. Learn from this.” That is what Martin thinks. But remember, the psalms are Torah. They are meant to be instruction. Therefore we cannot simply sidestep these imprecations and say, “Well, we are not really meant to learn anything from these imprecations.” I do not think saying, “these are the angry expressions of a sinful heart,” is a good answer.

Another attempted solution is to say, “This is an example of a lower level of morality. Our ethical sense has evolved since that time.” This is not at all fair to the Old Testament. The Law of Moses preceded the time of David, and the Law of Moses forbids private vengeance. In fact, it commands kindness to enemies. Look at Leviticus 19:18: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” But some of these imprecations certainly sound vengeful. Also, Exodus 23:4-5 says, “If you come across your enemy’s goat or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you falling down under its load do not leave it there, be sure to help him with it.” In other words, do kindness even to those who hate you. When Paul, in Romans 12:19-ff, forbids a vengeful spirit it is interesting to note his source material: “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. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

We might say that this is an example of how the New Testament has advanced beyond the negative, vengeful spirit of the Old Testament. However, in this passage Paul was quoting from Deuteronomy 32:35 and Proverbs 25:21-22. He is quoting the Old Testament. Thus we cannot say that the time of the Old Testament was a less advanced stage with a lower standard of morality. Furthermore, David is one of the primary writers of these imprecations, and yet if you read the story of David in the books of Samuel, you do not find him to be a particularly vengeful person. In fact, it is quite the opposite. He is portrayed as someone who is deeply pious. He is a man after God’s own heart. Is it believable that words such as these, of deep piety elsewhere in the psalms, are in truth only prelude and postlude to a horrid discourse of angry curses sounding forth from a heart that cannot forgive? In other words, I do not think it solves the problem to say either that this is language of the heart that we should not follow, or that this is another level of morality. These solutions do not fit the context.

Let us look at genre considerations. What do we mean by genre? Genre means a certain kind of literature that has its own tone and conventions. Thus when we encounter that kind of literature, we are supposed to come with a set of expectations fitting to it so as not to misread that particular kind of literature. What we are dealing with here is a particular kind of literature that is especially characteristic of what we would call Middle Eastern poetry, not prose. John DeWitt comments on the two pictures of David and his suffering that we receive in the historical books and Psalms. In the prose account there is a portrait of courage and “noble fortitude.” But in the poetical representation of David, in the Psalms, we tend to have moaning and groaning. These are seemingly the words of a sniveling coward in places, if we take it that way. There are not, however, two Davids. Rather, there are two genres. In the historical books we have a prose account of what he was like. In Psalms we have the emotive expressions of his poetry.

The poetry David was writing was poetry of the fervid, passionate, and demonstrative east where to this day feeling of any kind is scarcely thought to be genuine unless it is expressed extravagantly. The people of this region often use very colorful and graphic language. Unless his feelings were extravagantly expressed, they would have been deemed, in his context, as un-genuine. This was a different mode of speech than what we are familiar with in the West. We need to be careful about adopting a wooden interpretation of the imprecations. Kidder says, “Here we should notice that invective [the imprecations] has its own rhetoric in which horror may be piled up on horror, more to express the speaker’s sense of outrage, rather than to spell out the penalties he intends.” Let me illustrate this for you. Last week my family was reading Jeremiah 20:14-18, and this is what Jeremiah said:

Cursed be the day I was born!
 May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!
Cursed be the man who brought my father the news,
 who made him very glad, saying,
 “A child is born to you—a son!”
May that man be like the towns
 the LORD overthrew without pity.
 May he hear wailing in the morning,
 a battle cry at noon.
For he did not kill me in the womb,
 with my mother as my grave,
 her womb enlarged forever.
Why did I ever come out of the womb
 to see trouble and sorrow
 and to end my days in shame?

We say, “Do not kill the messenger,” but that is exactly what Jeremiah is calling for. “Curse the man, may he be like the towns the Lord overthrew without pity.” But he was only the messenger. Given the chance, with a loaded weapon, I do not think Jeremiah would have tried to kill the man. This is simply the rhetoric—a kind of hyperbolic rhetoric—with which he is expressing the depth of his sorrow at this time. He invokes a curse even on the man who announced his birth.

Studying the psalms with the highest concentration of imprecations, these are some of the general principles we find. First of all, the curses are pronounced against those who are against God, not just those who are against the psalmist. These are not just personal curses. I think Christ’s teaching to turn the other cheek would have been true in the times of both testaments. An example of those whom these curses were pronounced against is Psalm 5:10: “Declare them guilty, O God! / Let their intrigues be their downfall. / Banish them for their many sins, / for they have rebelled against you.” They have rebelled against the Davidic king, the representative of God on earth, and therefore they have ultimately rebelled against the Lord. That is an important point. When an attack was made against the Davidic king, it was a rebellion against God. Secondly, there is a focus on God’s name in these imprecations. Psalm 83:5 and 16 say, “With one mind they plot together; / they form an alliance against you— [...] Cover their faces with shame / so that men will seek your name, O LORD.” There is a focus on God’s name and His honor. The third observation is that these imprecations are pronounced against those who are incorrigible—they are uncooperative. They are bad and they do not want to get better. They are uncorrectable, lost causes. They are not about to change. These imprecations are pronounced against those who have shown their incorrigibility, who are not in a position to change. Listen to Psalm 58:4-5: “Their venom is like the venom of a snake, / like that of a cobra that has stopped its ears, / that will not heed the tune of the charmer, / however skillful the enchanter may be.” In other words, bring in the best snake charmer around and this snake will not listen. He is incorrigible.

The fourth observation is that the imprecations seem to be aimed at proving God’s justice. Psalm 58:11 says, “Then men will say, / ‘Surely the righteous still are rewarded; / surely there is a God who judges the earth.’” In other words, this will be a demonstration that justice is still served. God is still in charge. The fifth observation is that there always seems to be a sense of the curse being something fully and truly deserved. (Now, I am not sure how that works out with the curse of Jeremiah against the poor messenger, but in terms of the Psalms there is a sense of men getting what they deserve. I think Jeremiah

was speaking poetically, using hyperbolic rhetoric.) Psalm 35:1 says, “Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; / fight against those who fight against me.” Contend with the contenders. Fight the fighters. Return to them in kind. Psalm 35:7-8 says, “Since they hid their net for me without cause / and without cause dug a pit for me, / may ruin overtake them by surprise— / may the net they hid entangle them, / may they fall into the pit, to their ruin.” They are trying to ruin me; may they fall into their own trap. Psalm 58:1-2 and 11 says, “Do you rulers indeed speak justly? / Do you judge uprightly among men? / No, in your heart you devise injustice, / and your hands mete out violence on the earth. [...] Then men will say, / ‘Surely the righteous still are rewarded; / surely there is a God who judges the earth.’” Psalm 109:16-20 says,

For he never thought of doing a kindness,
but hounded to death the poor
and the needy and the brokenhearted.
He loved to pronounce a curse—
may it come on him;
he found no pleasure in blessing—
may it be far from him.
He wore cursing as his garment;
it entered into his body like water,
into his bones like oil.
May it be like a cloak wrapped about him,
like a belt tied forever around him.
May this be the LORD’s payment to my accusers,
to those who speak evil of me.

These people were wearing their curses like a garment—now may it cling to them so they cannot escape.

The sixth and final observation is this: the rejoicing is in the Lord’s justice and salvation. Psalm 35:9 says, “Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD / and delight in his salvation.” Psalm 58:11 says, “Surely the righteous still are rewarded.” There is rejoicing in God’s vindication as the wicked who continue unrepentant in their wickedness will be brought to justice.

These imprecations are the expressions of an Old Testament saint for the vindication of God’s righteousness. Theodicy, the justification of God’s ways to man, is a dominant theme in the Old Testament. In the Old Testament period there was a certain vagueness in their understanding of the afterlife. We can suffer greatly in this life, knowing that it is for a limited duration and that heaven awaits us. Now, I believe the saints in the Old Testament period did have some understanding that there was an afterlife. But they had not been taught as fully as we have what heaven would be like—and even now we do not understand fully; we only know it will be great. But we can sometimes defer to the afterlife and say, “There God will right all wrongs.” When that notion of the afterlife is vaguer there is a more intense desire that God do it now. “In the grave who can praise you?” Thus there was urgency for the vindication of God’s righteousness. Particularly in the life of David, these so-called imprecatory psalms are appeals for God and God’s kingdom. David was the theocratic king. He was to serve as God’s regent on earth. He was not God, but he was a representative of the rule of God on earth. Therefore those who attacked the Davidic king were in a very real sense attacking God’s representative. If someone sends a diplomat to us and we attack that diplomat, we are in a very real sense attacking the country that sent the diplomat. Martin explains it like this:

David was a representative of God, in a different way indeed from priest or prophet, but not less really than either. And as he was God's representative, his enemies ceased to be private enemies, nor were they guilty of treason simply. They must be accounted the enemy of God himself and of his cause on earth. As such, David might anticipate for them, he might even ask for them, a fate which he would never have desired for those who were mere personal opponents, and he could do this without sin exactly as the apostle Paul could without sin write, "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema."

The apostle Paul also pronounced imprecations—curses directed to those who do not love the Lord Jesus Christ and who were leading the Lord's children astray. Those who attacked the Davidic king attacked the reign of God.

Martin also points out that these fierce-sounding utterances are an Old Testament saint's expression of his abhorrence of sin. We talk about hating the sin but loving the sinner, and I think that is important. Martin argues that this is a distinction that would have been difficult for the Old Testament saint since his or her understanding of Satan would not have been as full as ours. We have more knowledge of the role of Satan as the one seeking to devour people. The saints of the Old Testament had a growing awareness of Satan and who he was, but in the Old Testament it was not yet as fully disclosed by divine revelation. Also, says Martin, the so-called imprecatory psalms are prophetic teachings about the attitude of God toward sin and impenitent and persistent sinners.

Here is a final question for us to think about. Who are the enemies of Christians now? The enemies are different. We struggle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities and powers, spiritual forces of darkness in high places. How are we to fight this battle? By praying for conversions and by actively seeking to advance God's kingdom here on earth. We do not want to spiritualize it entirely, because the judgment day is really coming. There will come a day when the weeds and the wheat will be divided. The weeds are still among the wheat and thus we cannot really go about uprooting the weeds without danger of uprooting the wheat. From our perspective, how do we know which is which? We cannot. We do not know until the end of the story is told at the end of each individual life. What if Christian militants had killed Saul of Tarsus because he stood by while Christians were martyred? They would have been attempting to destroy the wheat and not the weed. Right now we simply do not know about people's souls, and we are called upon to pray that God will draw to Himself those who at this point are very far from Him. In 2 Peter 3:9, we read that important verse about God's patience: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." We live in a time of common grace in which the rain falls on the just and unjust alike. But the Day of Judgment is coming, and we do our contemporaries no favor if we obscure the fundamental truth that judgment is coming. Read Luke 13 and discover how Jesus responded to natural disasters and public criminal acts. He pointed to them as reminders that judgment was coming and a reason to repent. Therefore I think we do our contemporaries a favor to say, when bad things happen, "Judgment is coming. As bad as this is, this is only a foretaste of what awaits the world outside of Christ." As we see with horror what is happening in this world, that should encourage us to seek to be those instruments of God's love who have an opportunity to see people come to know Him.