

Understanding Forgiveness Is Vital to Comprehending the Gospel

In my previous article we were looking at David's imprecatory portion of verses 22-28 of Psalm 69. In that section, David seems to be calling down curses on his and God's enemies. And yet, if that were true, David would be contradicting Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount where we're *commanded* to love and pray for those who would seek to do us harm. Listen to these words from the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Matthew 5:43-45) True children of the heavenly Father desire to *bear the family resemblance*. By grace, Christians are called to love those who seek to do us harm.

Looking back at the first portion of this second half of Psalm 69, it's interesting that Paul quotes verses 22-23 in Romans 11:9-10. In that chapter of Romans, Paul is speaking of the people of Israel who have rejected Jesus Christ and the true gospel. While the "elect received the gospel" Paul says, "the rest were hardened." Again, notice that the outcome of their hardened hearts is that they never repent and turn to Christ. Moving further in Psalm 69, David speaks of heaping "punishment upon punishment" (vs. 27) on them and when we come to verse 28 he seems to want them to not be blessed with eternal life, "blotted out of the book of the living." What's going on here?

We've looked at the imprecatory Psalms before, but let me say a couple of things that I hope will be a helpful reminder. It's been suggested that David's prayer, written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is better seen as a *prophecy* of a *future time* for those who *ultimately* reject God's salvation. To support this, along with what I've already called our attention to, notice that David is not seeking his own vengeance but he's praying that *God* will rightfully judge people for their sin. Imagine a scenario where we believe that we have the right to call down curses on those non-believers who are doing us harm. In other words, do we believe that scripture calls us to only and always pray for the *judgment hammer of God*, as it were, to fall on anyone who wants to harm us?

If this were true, at the very minimum, this would have us praying in opposition to one important way that God matures us spiritually through our suffering. In addition to this, our forgiveness, love, and prayers may also be used by God to call a non-believer to salvation in Christ. So, then, for David to want God to rightly judge *anyone* assumes a person or persons who, *ultimately*, refuse to repent. David, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is, in effect, praying that God

would be vindicated when he has to, one day, eternally judge all those who will not turn to him, by faith, and be saved. David's prayer here *assumes* the desire for his enemies to *turn and repent*. When the imprecatory prayers are rightly understood, they're not in opposition to the life and teaching of Jesus. Listen to these helpful words from theologian and commentator, John Calvin.

“David does not allow himself recklessly to pour out his wrath, even as the greater part of men, when they feel themselves wronged, intemperately give way to their own passion; but being under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, he was kept from going beyond the bounds of duty, and simply called upon God to exercise just judgment against the reprobate. . . . Since, then, the Spirit of wisdom, uprightness and moderation, put these imprecations into the mouth of David, his example cannot justly be pleaded in self-vindication by those who pour forth their wrath and spite upon every one that comes in their way, or who are carried away by a foolish impatience to take revenge; never allow themselves to reflect for a moment what good purpose this can serve, nor making any efforts to keep their passion within due bounds.”

The apostle Paul writes, “Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while *we were enemies* we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” (Romans 5:9-11) If Jesus was willing to forgive his enemies (us!) how could any Christian possibly think that we should withhold forgiveness from *anyone!* Understanding forgiveness is vital to comprehending the gospel.

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