

Perspectives



Deliver Us from Evil

MAYBE CLAUS WESTERMANN WAS RIGHT. MAYBE CHRISTIANS CAN NO LONGER pray the imprecatory psalms, with their unapologetic outcries against the enemies; maybe, with the coming of Christ and his call to radical forgiveness, these “have once and for all been taken away from Christ’s congregation.”¹ Maybe they are too dangerous, giving license to hate in the name of God.

Still, there is no doubt that we can understand these prayers better today than we could on September 10:

Rise up, O LORD, in your anger; lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies.
(Ps 7:6)

Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me. (Ps 25:19)

Hear my voice, O God, in my complaint; preserve my life from the dread enemy. Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked, from the scheming of evildoers, who whet their tongues like swords, who aim bitter words like arrows, shooting from ambush at the blameless; they shoot suddenly and without fear. They hold fast to their evil purpose; they talk of laying snares secretly, thinking, “Who can see us? Who can search out our crimes? We have thought out a cunningly conceived plot.” For the human heart and mind are deep. (Ps 64:1-6)

Are these not just the words we need in the face of airplanes delivering death through the sky and letters delivering death through the mail? Indeed, are not these psalms God’s own gift, providing us the words to express to God our rage, to cry out for God’s own justice against those who attack the innocent, to take seriously a presence of evil (Evil?) that stands opposed to God’s own love and mercy? Oh, yes, we need these psalms.

But, still, we can’t allow them, can we? Once God has taken God’s wrath upon himself in Christ, how can we call down God’s wrath upon others? Once Jesus has asked God to forgive his own murderers, how can we not forgive even the terrorists among us? Once we have heard Jesus’ radicalization of the law, how can we divide between them and us, as though only “they” are the wicked?

That’s the danger, of course: that in the psalms’ portrayal of the enemies we might find permission to divide the world—or the several worlds in which we live—between them and us. That danger becomes clearest when we recognize that, in the present international crisis, “they” are praying with equal fervor against us,

¹Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*, trans. Ralph Gehrke (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980) 66-67.

and often using the same psalms. That the spiritual descendants of Abraham should be using David's hymns to invoke the wrath of God upon one other is too monstrous to contemplate. It is a collision of matter and anti-matter that threatens to annihilate faith itself.

So, what shall we do? Not pray? But the enemies are real, and they mean to kill us. To whom then shall we go in our rage and fear if not to God? Christians will turn to Jesus with this terrible question—especially since it is only in Christ that we pray the psalms at all. And Jesus, once more, teaches us to “pray like this”: Deliver us from evil!

Jesus, too, knows that evil is real; so powerful, in fact, that only God can deliver us from its attack. Finally, pushed to the edge, only prayer remains. So, yes, God, deliver us from evil—the evil born of frustration and hatred that delights in suffering and death, the evil that has such great power to destroy but none to create. We are in danger, and we seek your protection. We bring our plea raw, for there is neither time nor energy to refine it. Our plea is raw, because our wounds are raw; so the harsh language of the psalms sounds just about right. We can be grateful for it.

Rage and fear are not enough, however, for finally, no matter how real, they are emotions of little faith and emotions that, held on to, will destroy us. God, who creates faith, will not leave us in their dark embrace. Thus, in the Lord's Prayer Jesus precedes the petition for deliverance from evil with one for forgiveness, just “as we forgive our debtors.” At this, we both rejoice and recoil. We know our own need for forgiveness, and we are overwhelmed that it is offered us; but we are reminded of our own need to forgive others, and we know how hard that is. So, failing to forgive, we fall into the ultimate trap: *we* become those whose hatred delights in the suffering of others. And now, the petition for deliverance from evil must be directed at ourselves.

Already in his fourth-century sermons on the Lord's Prayer, Gregory of Nyssa reminds us that the psalmist's prayer that “sinners be consumed from the earth” and that “the wicked be no more” (Ps 104:35) dare not be directed at other persons *per se*, but only at “sin and injustice” itself: “[T]his does not mean that [the human] is something evil; for how could the image of God be evil?”² For Gregory, the evil that can destroy our souls is finally “estrangement from God.” But then, the enemy is as much within ourselves as it is the other, because “opportunities for sin” are found “agitating the soul of everyone.”³ Much later, C. S. Lewis will agree: “We know the proper object of utter hostility”—such as that cursed by the psalmists—it is “wickedness, especially our own.”⁴

To pray against the enemy is always to pray also against the self. Thus, the pe-

²Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord's Prayer. The Beatitudes*, Ancient Christian Writers 18 (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1954) 30. See the article in this issue (pages 64-70) on Gregory's sermons by Roy Hammerling.

³*Ibid.*, 31.

⁴C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958) 136.

tition for deliverance from evil must be found, as it is in Jesus' prayer, back to back with the petition for forgiveness and the will to forgive. The terrorist (of whatever stripe) and the "true believer" (of whatever persuasion) will not admit of fault within and are thus swept away into becoming themselves deliverers of evil. In Jesus' prayer, we ask to be preserved from them and from this soul-destroying fate for ourselves.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, too, reminds us that "I, myself, with my sin, belong under this judgment"—that is, God's judgment on the enemies of the cause of God. "Thus the imprecatory psalms lead to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God which forgives enemies. I cannot forgive the enemies of God with my own resources. Only the crucified Christ can do that, and I through him. Thus the carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all [people] in Jesus Christ."⁵

While our prayers begin raw, they don't remain raw, for, as we are in Christ, our prayers are transformed by Christ. We throw our prayers of rage, even of hatred, at God, and they are transformed by Christ, returned to us as prayers for forgiveness—for ourselves and others.

Prayers against the enemy—while perhaps inevitable and, in the face of attack and oppression, appropriate—are profoundly dangerous: dangerous for us because, untransformed, the rage to which they give voice will destroy our souls; dangerous for the world, because, unfettered, they can feed with religious zeal the terrible hatred and the xenophobic tribalisms that tear us apart—our lives, our cities, perhaps our species. Thus, prayer against the enemies can be Christian prayer only as it confesses that we are ourselves participants in the evil from which we seek deliverance, only as it recognizes that the line between the wicked and the righteous runs finally not between you and me but through the middle of me, only as it understands the inseparability of deliverance from evil and forgiveness of sins, only as it hears Christ at the cross intercede equally for us and for those who seek our hurt. As we pray in private, we trust that the Holy Spirit will impress upon us this stark Christian truth, turning us away from hatred and toward the spirit of Christ. As we pray in public, leaders of worship must always make this explicitly clear, never taking for granted that recognizing Christ in the other goes without saying, for otherwise it is we who lead people into temptation. Lord, deliver us from evil.

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⁵Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*, trans. James H. Burtness (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970) 58-59.