

Lesson 17: Defeat my enemies

Memory Verse: You are not a God who takes pleasure in evil; with you the wicked cannot dwell.
(Psalm 5:4)

One of the most misunderstood features of the Psalms are the frequent requests by the writers to have God do something terrible to the writer's enemies. One of the worst such verses is found in Psalm 137, the Psalm about the Babylonian captivity.

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. (Psalm 137:8, 9)

It should be obvious that to do what the happy re-payer is portrayed as doing here would violate God's law at several levels of understanding it. Killing babies by dashing them against rocks is not a loving thing to do, and it damages the person doing the killing. How can you be happy when you are suffering damage?

There are a lot of people in our world who think that the sixth commandment, “do no murder,” doesn't apply when you are repaying someone for their crimes. But neither the commandments nor anything else in the Bible provide such an exception to God's law of love. The short and simple fact is that you cannot reduce the amount of evil in the world by engaging in your own evil against someone else's evil.

Here's another of these “do in my enemy” passages:

O God, whom I praise,
do not remain silent,
for wicked and deceitful men
have opened their mouths against me;
they have spoken against me with lying tongues.
With words of hatred they surround me;
they attack me without cause.
In return for my friendship they accuse me,
but I am a man of prayer.
They repay me evil for good,
and hatred for my friendship. (Psalm 109:1-5)

Notice the unfairness of what David writes about here. He tries to do good, but these enemies do bad things to him anyway. Now David asks for what we would have to call retribution.

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. (verses 6-15)

We will find one explanation for this language in the life and example of David himself. Twice while David was hiding from Saul, who wanted to kill him, David had a chance to kill Saul. Both times he refused. Between those events David sought payment from a man whose flocks and flock tenders he had protected from ever-present threats. When the man refused to pay, David got his men together to attack the man and extract payment by force.

When the man's wife heard what was happening she loaded up with gifts and went to meet David. Here's part of what she said: "Now since the LORD has kept you, my master, from bloodshed and from avenging yourself with your own hands, as surely as the LORD lives and as you live, may your enemies and all who intend to harm my master be like Nabal." (1 Samuel 25:26)

And here's part of David's response: "May you be blessed for your good judgment and for keeping me from bloodshed this day and from avenging myself with my own hands. Otherwise, as surely as the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, who has kept me from harming you, if you had not come quickly to meet me, not one male belonging to Nabal would have been left alive by daybreak." (verses 33, 34)

David would eventually take the role of king, which would include the duty of the judge, and that would, in his culture and society, require him to avenge those who were wronged. Even in modern society we believe that it is wrong for a person to avenge themselves; that authorized government should do that job.

So when we get to the Psalms we see a man who is frustrated by his enemies. People he has been good to have been mean to him in return. He knows it would be wrong for him to avenge himself. So he takes the matter to God. "God," he says, "here's my situation. You know what wrongs they have done to me. If it were up to me, here's what I would do. But I give the situation to you. You take care of it in your way."

My shield is God Most High,
who saves the upright in heart.
God is a righteous judge,
a God who expresses his wrath every day.
If he does not relent,
he will sharpen his sword;
he will bend and string his bow.
He has prepared his deadly weapons;

he makes ready his flaming arrows.
He who is pregnant with evil
and conceives trouble gives birth to disillusionment.
He who digs a hole and scoops it out
falls into the pit he has made.
The trouble he causes recoils on himself;
his violence comes down on his own head.
I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness
and will sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High. (Psalm 7:11-17)

The introduction to this Psalm tells us David wrote it about a specific enemy, a Benjamite named Cush. There is no reference to this person in the story of David elsewhere in the Bible, so we don't know what the issue was. But notice the last four couplets. Here we see how God “takes vengeance.” The trouble an evil person dreams up causes the evil person's demise. As we already know, sin is its own punishment. Sin, not God, kills the sinner.

In our next lesson we'll learn a different, more powerful way to understand these passages in Psalms.

Possible thought papers:

1. Find a different Psalm that wishes disaster on the writer's enemies. Try to put yourself in the writer's situation. How would you feel if those things happened to you? What would you say to God about it?
2. Write a Psalm of your own, using the Hebrew couplet style, about a difficult situation in your life. Be sure you leave the actual solution in God's hands.
3. Write about another Bible character who was wronged, but who left the matter with God.