

PSALMS

Chapter 79

O God, the nations have come into your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple; they have laid Jerusalem in ruins. ²They have given the bodies of your servants to the birds of the heavens for food, the flesh of your faithful to the beasts of the earth. ³They have poured out their blood like water all around Jerusalem, and there was no one to bury them. ⁴We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those around us. ⁵How long, O LORD? Will you be angry forever? Will your jealousy burn like fire? ⁶Pour out your anger on the nations that do not know you, and on the kingdoms that do not call upon your name! ⁷For they have devoured Jacob and laid waste his habitation. ⁸Do not remember against us our former iniquities; let your compassion come speedily to meet us, for we are brought very low. ⁹Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for your name's sake! ¹⁰Why should the nations say, "Where is their God?" Let the avenging of the outpoured blood of your servants be known among the nations before our eyes! ¹¹Let the groans of the prisoners come before you; according to your great power, preserve those doomed to die! ¹²Return sevenfold into the lap of our neighbors the taunts with which they have taunted you, O Lord! ¹³But we your people, the sheep of your pasture, will give thanks to you forever; from generation to generation we will recount your praise.

Ps 79 Israel's prayer for God's forgiveness and help and for his judgment on the nations that have so cruelly destroyed her, showing utter contempt for both the Lord and his people. Like Ps 74, with which it has many thematic links, it dates from the time of the exile. The poignancy of its appeal is heightened by its juxtaposition to Ps 77 (recalling God's saving acts under Moses) and Ps 78 (recalling God's saving acts under David), two psalms with which it is significantly linked by the shepherd-sheep figure and other thematic elements. Israel acknowledges that the Lord has used the nations to punish her for her sins, so she pleads for pardon. But she knows too that the nations have acted out of their hostility to and disdain for God and his people; that warrants her plea for God's judgment on them (see Isa 10:5–11; 47:6–7). Daniel's prayer (Da 9:4–19) contains much that is similar to the elements of penitence in this psalm. (CSB)

Perhaps written during the Babylonian exile, this psalm may lament the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC. *Asaph*. Perhaps not the one who served during David's reign (2Ch 35:15). Perhaps the writer is a descendant, or is of the "school" of Asaph. See intros, Ps 73; 74. Recognizing the invasion as divine judgment (vv 5, 8), he begs for God's mercy and restoration.

Format: Vv 1–4, Jerusalem destroyed; vv 5–7, appeal to God's anger; vv 8–10, prayer for atonement; vv 11–13, save the prisoners, take revenge on our enemies. (TLSB)

The psalmist has three prayers: that God's honor be upheld, that his people be forgiven, and that his enemies be punished. (PBC)

A number of psalms use curses and express themselves so violently that modern readers find them shocking and even wonder how they could appear in the Sacred Scriptures. When the psalmist's emotions spill over into violence, it is important to understand why. (TLSB p. 879)

Christians should understand that the violent outbursts in these psalms are not prescriptions for the behavior of God's people but illustrations of emotion that God's people will indeed

experience. Christians today who lose loved ones to war or to violent criminals will have these same feelings of anger and revenge. Praying the imprecatory psalms can help God's people express their anguish before God rather than act out their feelings in an unjust way. Imprecatory psalms prayed with psalms of repentance and hope can guide trouble hearts through the feelings they cannot escape. (TLSB – 879)

The curses contained in these psalms are often shocking to modern readers, but such prayers are in accordance with God's curse against sin. (PBC)

The Lutheran Study Bible lists the following psalms as imprecatory: 35; 55; 59; 79; 109; 137.

Some psalms include vivid curses which ask God to punish our enemies, as He protects and defends us from evil. In light of Jesus' teaching to love our enemies, these prayers may seem improper and un-Christian. However, in each one the psalmist cries out for God to take revenge. The imprecatory psalms put the psalmist squarely on the side of God who hates injustice and who does indeed rescue His abused children. While we leave vengeance to the Lord, and while we yearn for the ungodly to turn from sin to the Savior, we still hate wickedness and evil. Ultimately, Satan instigates all injustice, and the imprecatory psalms find their true target as we pray them against the kingdom of darkness. (LL)

No section of the Psalter causes us greater difficulty today than the so-called imprecatory psalms. With shocking frequency their thoughts penetrate the entire Psalter (5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 16, 21, 23, 28, 31, 35, 36, 40, 41, 44, 52, 54, 55, 58, 59, 68, 69, 70, 71, 137, and others). Every attempt to pray these psalms seems doomed to failure. They seem to be an example of what people think of as the religious first stage toward the NT. Christ on the cross prays for his enemies and teaches us to do the same. How can we still, with these Psalms, call for the wrath of God against our enemies? The question is therefore: Can the imprecatory psalms be understood as God's word for us and as the prayer of Jesus Christ? Can the Christian pray these psalms? Note carefully again that we do not ask about possible motives, which we can never fathom anyway, but rather about the content of the prayer. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

The enemies referred to here are enemies of the cause of God, who lays hands on us for the sake of God. It is therefore nowhere a matter of personal conflict. Nowhere does the one who prays these psalms want to take revenge into his own hands. He calls for the wrath of God alone (cf. Romans 12:19). Therefore he must dismiss from his own mind all thought of personal revenge; he must be free from his own thirst for revenge. Otherwise, the vengeance would not be seriously commanded from God. This means that only the one who is himself innocent in relation to his enemy can leave the vengeance to God. The prayer for the vengeance of God is the prayer for the execution of his righteousness in the judgment of sin. This judgment must be made public if God is to stand by his word. It must also be promulgated among those whom it concerns. I myself, with my sin, belong under this judgment. I have no right to want to hinder this judgment. It must be fulfilled for God's sake and it has been fulfilled, certainly, in wonderful ways. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

God's vengeance did not strike the sinners, but the one sinless man who stood in the sinner's place, namely God's own Son. Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God, for the execution of which the psalm prays. He stilled God's wrath toward sin and prayed in the hour of the execution of the divine judgment: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do!" No other than he, who himself bore the wrath of God, could pray in this way. That was the end of all phony thoughts about the love of God which do not take sin seriously. God hates and redirects his enemies to the only righteous one, and this one asks forgiveness for them. Only in the cross of

Jesus Christ is the love of God to be found. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Thus the imprecatory psalm leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God which forgives enemies. I cannot forgive the enemies of God out of my own resources. Only the crucified Christ can do that, and I through him. Thus to carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all men in Jesus Christ. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Certainly it is important to distinguish in relation to these psalms whether I stand in the time of promise or in the time of fulfillment, but this distinction is true for all psalms. I pray the imprecatory psalms in the certainty of their marvelous fulfillment. I leave the vengeance to God and ask him to execute his righteousness to all his enemies, knowing that God has remained true to himself and has himself secured justice in his wrathful judgment on the cross, and that this wrath has become grace and joy for us. Jesus Christ himself requests the execution of the wrath of God on his body, and thus he leads me back daily to the gravity and the grace of his cross for me and all enemies of God. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Even today I can believe the love of God and forgive my enemies only by going back to the cross of Christ, to the carrying out of the wrath of God. (*We need to remember that Bonhoeffer was being persecuted by the Nazi's.*) The cross of Jesus is valid for all men. Whoever opposes him, whoever corrupts the word of the cross of Jesus on which God's wrath must be executed, must bear the cruse of God some or another. The NT speaks with great clarity concerning this and does not distinguish itself at all in this respect from the OT, but it also speaks of the joy of the church in that day on which the God will execute his final judgment (Gal. 1:8f; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 18; 19; 20:11). In this way the crucified Jesus teaches us to pray the imprecatory psalms correctly. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

79:1–4 What the nations have done: They have attacked God's own special domain, violated his temple, destroyed his royal city, slaughtered his people, degraded them in death (by withholding burial—and leaving their bodies as carrion for birds and beasts) and reduced them to the scorn of the world. (CSB)

79:1 *your inheritance.* Cf. 78:62, 71. Here reference is to Israel's homeland as the Lord's domain. (CSB)

Either the land God promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (e.g., Gn 50:24) or God's people themselves (e.g., Ps 78:62). Here it likely refers to the land. (TLSB)

holy temple. No Gentile was allowed into the temple (cf Ezk 44:9). (TLSB)

By identifying the places defiled as “your inheritance” and “your holy temple,” the psalmist is appealing to God to defend his honor by taking vengeance on the wicked (cc. 6-12). (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

79:2-3 Unburied bodies of Israel's slain litter the streets, left exposed to scavenging animals. No one remained to bury them. Normally, even executed criminals were buried (Dt 21:22–23). (TLSB)

To be left unburied was a great humiliation; it indicates that was no respect for the dead, that the dead were unloved and uncared for, their death being treated no differently than the death of animals. In the ancient Near East to be left unburied was also taken to mean the spirits of the

departed would be affected (see Deut. 28:25ff; Jer. 7:33, 8:2, 9:22). This was not what the Israelies were taught, bur like so many pagan ideas it might have become part of popular lore. In either case, bodies lying unburied were a sign of dishonor and humiliation. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

79:2 *your servants*. Though banished from the Lord’s land for sins that cannot be denied, the exiles plead their special covenant relationship with God (see “your saints,” here, and “your people, the sheep of your pasture,” v. 13). (CSB)

79:3 *poured out blood ... all around Jerusalem*. Cf. 2Ki 21:16. (CSB)

Here was contempt and cruelty on a national scale. And with many unburied bodies there was blood everywhere, forcing the people to be continuously aware of the grievous catastrophe. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

79:4 *neighbors*. Gentile nations bordering Israel who taunted and mocked the sufferers. (TLSB)

The writer may have had in mind people like Edomites who mocked the devastated Judeans. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

79:5–8 A prayer for God to relent and deal with the nations who do not acknowledge him. (CSB)

79:5 *how long, O Lord* – They are at their wits end; they sense that God has rejected them by turning on them in his anger, and they express this with a rhetorical question. In so doing they make no pretense of innocence, but only hold out some hope that this will not last forever. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

79:6–7 Perhaps the psalmist is quoting Jeremiah here. (CSB)

79:6 *Pour out your anger*. As they “poured out” (v. 3) the blood of your people. The exiles plead with God to redress the wrongs committed against them. (CSB)

Wordplay (cf v 3). Just as the Babylonians “poured out” Israel’s blood, so Israel calls upon God to “pour out” His avenging wrath. (TLSB)

When this is done, justice will be done, God’s power will be demonstrated, and his love for his people will be reaffirmed. (PBC)

79:7 *devoured*. Like wild beasts. (CSB)

They were completely destroyed. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

Jacob. A synonym for Israel (see Ge 32:28). (CSB)

79:8 *our former iniquities*. Israel suffered exile because of the accumulated sins of the nation (see 2Ki 17:7–23; 23:26–27; 24:3–4; Da 9:4–14), from which she did not repent until the judgment of God had fallen on her. The exiles here pray that God will take notice of their penitence and not continue to hold the sins of past generations against his now repentant people. (CSB)

Lit, “iniquities of forefathers,” referring collectively to those in Israel’s history as being guilty before God. But the psalmist does not blame his ancestors for God’s judgment. He realizes that the present generation participates in the same sins. (TLSB)

This connects this psalm with Psalm 78. (PBC)

compassion. Here personified as God’s agent sent to bring relief. (CSB)

come speedily – The urgency is for God’s tender mercies (s.v. Ps. 25:6). (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

79:9–11 A prayer for God to help and forgive his people and to redress the violent acts of the enemies. (CSB)

79:9 *for the glory of your name.* As the desolation of God’s people brings reproach to God (see v. 10), so their salvation and prosperity bring him glory. (CSB)

deliver. Accepted the atonement sacrifices you appointed and so forgave our sins. (CSB)

“Deliver us” may refer to the present captivity, but “atone for our sins” anticipates the much greater deliverance that only Christ can give.” (TLSB)

79:10 *why should nations say* – The appeal is introduced with a rhetorical question, which includes another rhetorical question: “Why should the nations say ‘Where is their God?’” The point of the question of the enemies (“Where is their God?) was to claim that the God of Israel is powerless and unreliable. (A Commentary on the Psalms - Ross)

avenging. Redress (see Dt 32:35, 43). (CSB)

79:11 *prisoners ... those doomed to die.* The exiles, as imperial captives in Babylonia (see 102:20)—not actually in prisons, but under threat of death should they seek to return to their homeland. (CSB)

After the Babylonians destroyed Israel, the most promising of Israel’s youth were taken into captivity. Cf Dn 1:1–4. (TLSB)

79:12–13 Concluding prayer and vow to praise. (CSB)

79:12 *into the laps.* A symbol of retribution. (CSB)

Asking God to completely repay those who have destroyed Israel. This is a “give them everything they have coming” prayer. (TLSB)

sevenfold. In full measure; the number seven symbolized completeness. (CSB)

taunted you. The enemies’ violent action against Israel was above all a high-handed reviling of God (see vv. 1, 10; 2Ki 19:10–12, 22–23; Isa 52:5). (CSB)

79:13 *sheep of your pasture.* Favorite image for God’s people (Ezk 34:11–17; Mi 2:12; Heb 13:20), particularly in the Psalms (23:1–4; 74:1; 95:7; 100:3). (TLSB)

from generation to generation. See 78:4. (CSB)

Ps 79 Originally written as a lament over Babylon's destruction of Israel, this psalm remains applicable to all Christians who suffer hardship and struggle at the hands of unbelievers. Christians throughout the world become the taunt of the unbelievers around them, as they are either explicitly derided or condescendingly treated because of their faith and trust in God. This psalm is well-prayed by such sufferers, as it assures us that God is reliable and His deliverance is trustworthy. • Give me steadfastness and strength, O Lord, to wait upon You in every difficulty and trial. Amen. (TLSB)