

DAILY BIBLE ILLUSTRATIONS

by

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Tenth Week - Third Day

JUSTIFYING THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

"Thus they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love. Set a wicked man over him, and let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is judged, let him be found guilty, and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few, and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children continually be vagabonds, and beg; let them seek their bread also from their desolate places. Let the creditor seize all that he has, and let strangers plunder his labor. Let there be none to extend mercy to him, nor let there be any to favor his fatherless children. Let his posterity be cut off, and in the generation following let their name be blotted out" (Psalm 109:5-13).

It is now necessary to produce the considerations which justify (or which go in a great measure, if not wholly, to explain) the strong language occasionally used by the sacred writers. The principle on which this must be done may be best exhibited by several illustrations.

Doeg, an Edomite herdsman in the time of Saul, slew eighty-five unarmed helpless priests, whom he knew to be wholly innocent of the charge made against them; and he himself personally took up his sword when no one else dared to lay a hand upon these consecrated servants of the Lord. But even with this he was not satisfied: *"Also Nob, the city of the priests, he struck with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and nursing infants, oxen and donkeys and sheep--with the edge of the sword"* (1 Sam. 22:19). Does not the very mention of this atrocity stir up feelings which cannot be repressed and which are only rendered more poignant by reflection upon the attending circumstances?

The slaughter of the children of Bethlehem by Herod, another Edomite, was an act of gratuitous cruelty that the imagination utterly refuses to carry out into the details. The shriek of the frantic Rachel in every dwelling where there was a little child to be struck down is all that the heart can hear. For Herod, the author of this massacre, every reader from that day down to this has had but one feeling. The horrors of conscience which he (as stated by Josephus) suffered on account of his wife, Mariamne, and which almost antedated the pains that knew no end, do not awaken the least sympathy for him. A happy end to that turbulent and blood-stained life would have shocked our sense of right and justice.

Herodias, the woman who wished the head of the revered forerunner of our Lord, John the

Baptist, to be brought to her in a dish, and who desired to glut her cruel and adulterous eyes with a sight which would have curdled the blood of anyone else, has excited a feeling in every reader's breast that no lapse of time has in any degree diminished. The simple words of the gospel narrative are enough. We need no word of commentary, for every right-minded man has one in the living fibers of his heart.

The striking of a great bell at midnight in Paris was the signal of a deed which men now shudder at, even at the distance of nearly three hundred years. It is a night long to be remembered; it needs no record in the page of history; it is engraved in permanent characters upon the moral sense of all Protestant Christendom. It was an outrage upon the nature which God has given to his creatures--an outrage which accepted no apology but demanded an atonement. And there were those who, in the horrors of the French Revolution, beheld the cup of retribution pressed to the lips of the nation stained with this blood. When they saw her compelled to drink the very dregs, they felt that a debt to divine justice had been paid. God's moral government had been vindicated and his word had come to pass: "They who sowed the wind *had* reaped the whirlwind." The distance of time made no difference in their view. The respite was scarcely so long as that afforded to the doomed Canaanites. Centuries are but years in the life of a nation.

Now what is the character of the principle manifested? What is the nature of the emotions with which such transactions as these are regarded?

A primary element in this state of feeling is *indignation*. Before we have had time to reflect there is an instant, a spontaneous burst of anger toward the wrong-doer. We cannot prevent it if we would. It is prior to all deliberation; in its first outbreak it is beyond control. It is outraged nature, and it will have its release.

Another element is *compassion* toward the injured party. We have an intuitive pity for weakness crushed to the dust, for innocence betrayed and violated. The wailing cry of infancy is in our ears, the whitened locks of age draggling in the dust are in our sight.

Another principal ingredient is the sense of *justice*. When a crime of extraordinary atrocity goes unpunished, we feel that justice is defrauded of its due. We are indignant that so great a wrong should go unpunished; and while it does, we have a feeling not only of insecurity but of justice being violated. Public order is disturbed. A shock has been given to that sense of rectitude which is common to man; and it is not of momentary duration but grows stronger with the lapse of time. Reflection only adds to its intensity. When a great wrong has been committed, nothing suffices to calm the perturbation of our moral nature until the grievance has been redressed. And what we feel by an irrepressible instinct of our moral nature, may we not express in language?

Reason as we may, this feeling is an original principle of our nature. It is instantaneous in its manifestations; its movements are rapid as the light. It gives no notice of its coming; neither

can it be stopped. It is also universal. It has shown itself in all ages, in every state of society, and in every period of human life among the rudest as well as the most refined. Whenever the voice of a brother's blood has cried from the ground, it has found an answering echo in every heart, no matter if in the midst of the most polished society or in the remotest outskirts of barbarism.

This feeling, however, is not necessarily accompanied by any ill-will or malice toward the offender. An atrocious crime has been perpetrated in our neighborhood. We have the strongest sympathy for the injured party and indignation toward the wrong-doer. We unite in all proper measures to bring him to condign punishment. If we do not in so many words imprecate calamities upon him, we feel and we perform what amounts to the same thing. We rejoice to hear that he is apprehended and justice will have its course. If he is proved guilty we are disappointed if he escapes, strongly desiring that he may suffer the punishment of his deeds. But all this is without any desire to witness the sufferings of any human being, or that these sufferings in themselves should be felt. We have no malice or private revenge to gratify. The absorbing emotion is for the good of society. We are persuaded that if the criminal were to escape, the bonds that hold men together would be weakened if not destroyed.

Shall we say that such a feeling is sinful? May it not rather be the evidence of a generous sympathy with mankind, of a finely educated conscience? Not to possess this moral sympathy may indicate a slow, or cold, or cowardly spirit, a dullness of spiritual apprehension and the absence of any keen desire that the disorders in God's kingdom should be rectified.

The connection of these considerations with the imprecations in the Psalms will be by this time clear to the reader. If it does not account for them all, it lies at the foundation of a large portion of them, by showing that these passages are justified by a primary and essentially innocent feeling of our nature. If we were placed in the position of the sacred writers, we should feel--and properly so--as they felt. The sight of the shameless cruelty of an Edomite hersman, if it did not dictate an imprecatory poem, would assuredly awaken the feelings on which that poem is founded. The impartial spectator, as he stood upon the smoking ashes of Jerusalem and saw the Edomites urge the Chaldeans to raze the Holy City to its foundations, and heard them suggest new and ingenious methods of cruelty, would join in the emotions of the oppressed even if he did not express in words the maledictions of the 137th Psalm.

Let any right-minded reader look at the lives of Antiochus Epiphanes, of the first Herod, of some of the Roman Emperors, of the Fouquier Tinville and the Carriers of the French Revolution. He cannot help but rejoice, yea exult, when the same cup is poured out to them which they had mingled for others. The feeling in the minds of those who penned the 55th and 69th Psalms was not malice. It was the indignation excited by cruelty and injustice and the desire that crime should be punished. If we were acquainted with the circumstances that called forth the imprecatory Psalms, we should doubtless find striking cases of treachery, practiced villany, and unblushing violation of the law as the cause or occasion.

The truth seems to be, then, that it is only a morbid benevolence, a mistaken philanthropy that takes offense at these Psalms, for in reality they are not opposed to the spirit of the gospel or to that love of enemies that our Lord enjoined. Resentment against evil-doers is so far from being sinful that we find it exemplified in the meek and spotless Redeemer himself, as when He looked on the Pharisees "with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts" (Mark 3:5). If the emotion and its utterance were essentially sinful, how could Paul wish the enemy of Christ to be accursed (1 Cor. 16:22), or say of his own enemy, "The Lord reward him according to his works"? How then could he say to the high priest, "God shall smite you, you whited wall" (Acts 23:3), or Peter say to Simon the sorcerer, "Your money perish with you" (Acts 8:20)? Above all, how then could the spirits of the just in heaven be represented as calling upon God for vengeance upon their enemies and persecutors (Rev. 6:10)?

Assuredly, it is not in the Old Testament only that God is set forth as a Judge and Vindicator, one who is "angry with the wicked every day." The God of the New Testament is also "a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). It is still "dreadful to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31). And to those who fall away after having received the knowledge of the truth, there is "a fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation to consume the adversaries." The divine righteousness has indeed lost so little of its rigor under the new covenant that he who despises the far richer means of grace offered under it becomes the heir of a much sorer punishment than he who perished under the old law (Heb. 10:28,29).

Let us be satisfied. The Bible, even here where many have deemed it most vulnerable and most open to attack, does not stand in need of any apology.