

Text: Ps 137.1-9

Our messages today have a definite “what I saw on my vacation” feel! Today I want to answer a question someone sent in for the “Ask the Pastor” series. I was thinking about it a couple of weeks ago while we were just beginning our time in the UK.

One of the places we went while we were away was Oxford, England, the site of the famous Oxford University. Oxford University is a collection of separate colleges, organized for various reasons, some of them going back as far as the 15th century. I am still not quite clear on what different studies each College specializes in, or how one gets to be a student at Oxford, or anything like that. Nevertheless, a history buff is in his glory in a place like Oxford. So many important men studied there, and very significant events happened there.

Perhaps the most momentous location is this one:

- Do you see the cross painted in the circle of the middle of this street?
- It is approximately the spot where Stuart Latimer, Nicholas Ridley, and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer were burned at the stake for their faith.

There are other famous events associate with Oxford, and many famous people. Our son Rory suggested we tour one particular College because it is where a man very popular as a Christian writer taught.

The College is Magdalen College (pronounced MAW-DA-LEN, but spelled Magdalen). The professor was C. S. Lewis, who wrote the popular children’s fantasy series, “The Chronicles of Narnia,” as well as many other more serious books about Christianity and the Bible.

The question for our study this afternoon is this:

“What do we mean by inspiration? What about some OT texts, are they inspired or not? (*i.e.*, the Psalms)”

The reason C. S. Lewis fits in with this question is that he famously held a negative opinion of some of the Psalms. He called them the “Cursing Psalms;” we would call them “imprecatory Psalms.”

Ps 137 is one example, although most of the Psalm is well beloved.

Read Ps 137.1-9

You can see we are fine with vv. 1-6, but vv. 7-9 gives us trouble.

I. The problem of imprecatory Psalms

A. The basic doctrine of Inspiration

1. All Scripture is breathed out by God (2 Tim 3.16)
2. Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Pt 2.21)
3. The extent of inspiration comes down to the individual words of Scripture (1 Cor 2.12-13)

The consequence is that every word of Scripture comes from God and is a completely true revelation. (God cannot lie.)

B. The position of C. S. Lewis surveyed

1. His description of the imprecations:

"In some of the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth."¹

- a. The "worst" is Psalm 109
- b. "Even more devilish in one verse is the, otherwise beautiful, Psalm 137 where a blessing is pronounced on anyone who will snatch up a Babylonian baby and beat its brains out on the pavement..."²

We have already acknowledged the Psalm has a hard word to accept, but we would not call God's word "devilish."

2. Lewis' solutions

- a. We could simply ignore them (but they will not be ignored)
- b. We can put these expressions to good use by considering our own hearts and how we respond to evil against us
- c. We must view the Psalmists as simply morally wrong

¹ "Reflections on the Psalms," in *The Inspirational Writings of C.S. Lewis*, by C. S. Lewis (New York: Inspirational Press, 1987), 142.

² "Psalms," 142.

- d. We can see in the maledictions the attitude of God toward sin (his best answer, though not the full answer)
3. Lewis' essential problem: a low view of inspiration
- a. Lewis says he has been accused of being a fundamentalist because he accepts miracles
 - b. But, he says, he sees Genesis as "derived from earlier Semitic stories which were Pagan and mythical"³
 - c. He sees God as using human writings to "have been raised by God above itself"⁴

That is, God uses it for his purposes, even though it is human and contains "naivete, error, contradiction, even (as in the cursing Psalms) wickedness..."⁵

- d. Essentially, Lewis holds a Neo-Orthodox view of inspiration

"The total result is not 'the Word of God' in the sense that every passage, in itself, gives impeccable science or history. It carries the Word of God; and we (under grace, with attention to tradition and to interpreters wiser than ourselves, and with the use of such intelligence and learning as we may have) receive that word from it not by using it as an encyclopedia or an encyclical but by steeping ourselves in its tone or temper and learning its overall message."⁶

- e. There is more
 - 1) Lewis goes on to second meanings (not intended by the human author) and allegory
 - 2) Overall, his view of inspiration is defective

³ "Psalms," 187.

⁴ "Psalms," 188.

⁵ "Psalms," 188.

⁶ "Psalms," 188.

Note: this does not make Lewis an unbeliever, from his testimony, I think he was a Christian

- C. The big problem: the doctrine of inspiration as taught by the Bible (see above)
1. If you start dismissing problematic parts of the Bible as “human,” “wrong,” or “devilish” — you have a problem with more than a few objectionable Psalms
 2. There are other parts of the Bible where the prophets issue similar outbursts (Jer 11.18-20, for example, and others)
 3. Such an attitude leaves us wide open for dismissing other problematic passages (acc. to human understanding)

Example, Genesis and creation as Lewis does in the quote above

II. The tension between hatred and love

- A. The requirement of loving one’s enemy is an OT concept: Lev 19.17-18, Pr 25.21
- B. God holds men accountable for their deeds, in the NT as well as the OT (Ac 17.30-31)
- C. Jesus pronounced judgement on Chorazin and Capernaum (Mt 11.21-24; Lk 10.13-15), also strongly rebuking Jewish leaders, esp. Pharisees (Mt 23 and others)
- D. Apostles considered heretics and evildoers accursed (1 Co 5.5, 16.22; Gal 1.8-9, 5.12; 2 Tim 4.14; 2 Pt 2; 2 Jn 7-11; Jude 2-16)
- E. Jesus taught that we can pray against injustice because God will ultimately bring justice for them (Lk 18.7)
- F. The martyrs in Revelation cry out to God for justice (Rev 6.10) and rejoice in the judgement of the wicked (Rev 18.20, 19.1-6)
- G. Paul taught we can look for vindication when the Lord returns, a time appointed for judgement (2 Th 1.6-10)

We can see that we have to understand love in the light of accountability, judgement, and justice; and all these in company with God’s long view of the Day of the Lord.

III. A Psalm specific understanding

- A. The Psalmists clearly express God's viewpoint of evil: God expresses his wrath against the wicked hotly (the Psalmist gives voice to God's view)
- B. The Psalmists speak prophetically: God did bring utter devastation to Babylon through the Persians
- C. The Psalmists speak prayerfully: they trust God to bring vengeance for evil but don't take judgement into their own hands
- D. The Psalmists may be speaking hyperbolically (with exaggeration) to heighten the evil of outrages their enemies committed [not the best, or only solution]
- E. The Christian applications
 1. In the spirit of Stephen, we may pray, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" which prayer can only be answered by their repentance
 2. We can pray for God's judgement on the wicked if they will not repent

Obligatory descent to the extremes: Can a Christian pray for God's judgement on a Hitler or a Stalin?
 3. We must always leave judgement up to God

Conclusion:

What are we to make of this in light of the doctrine of inspiration?

The Psalmists cry against the wicked does not make their words merely human and not divine.

On the contrary, the God we serve is not sentimental, will hold sin to account, and uses his prophets to express his view of the wicked in vivid terms. Judgement on them is coming.

For us, in our relations to God, we must accept his word and submit our hearts to him.