

Lenten Devotional March 12, 2022

Scripture

Psalm 149

1 Praise the Lord!
Sing to the Lord a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the faithful.
2 Let Israel be glad in its Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King.
3 Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre.
4 For the Lord takes pleasure in his people;
he adorns the humble with victory.
5 Let the faithful exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their couches.
6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,
7 to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishment on the peoples,
8 to bind their kings with fetters
and their nobles with chains of iron,
9 to execute on them the judgment decreed.
This is glory for all his faithful ones.
Praise the Lord!

Devotional

Nick Bersin, MTS Student

When we begin this psalm, reading it for private devotion or perhaps chanting it in worship, it is fairly congenial to us. Singing! Celebration! Rejoicing! The humble being adorned with victory! There is some war imagery—the previously mentioned victory, and the two-edged swords—but this imagery is clearly metaphorical, so we go with it.

Then we get to verse 7.

Suddenly, we're talking about executing vengeance on the nations—the others—and about punishing people, binding kings and nobles and executing judgment on them. This is not what I signed up for!

This kind of violent imagery is a stumbling block for many of us. How can we claim such violent and tribalistic texts as our Scripture? What happened to loving your enemies and worshiping with every tribe and tongue?

I am inclined to agree with Origen that such stumbling blocks are not embarrassing mistakes to be left out of the liturgy and forgotten, but rather inspired features of the text pushing us to deeper spiritual meanings. We approach this text in the penitential season of Lent, a time when we examine ourselves

and repent of our sin in anticipation of Good Friday and Easter. As we read this psalm, we may find that there is indeed a part of us that wants to chant these words about our earthly enemies. There is so much wickedness in the world, so many people who have wronged us. We would love to execute judgment on them!

But as we go down this path, we start to wonder whether we may not be the ones on the receiving end of the judgment. Why are we so sure that we are sitting in judgment over others and not the other way around?

If we continue to follow this thought, we realize that it is foolish either way. Jesus Christ will come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead. We will all stand before his judgment seat on the last day. Rather than propping ourselves up to judge others, we must throw ourselves before him and cry, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on us!" And when we do, we will find that he has already handed down his verdict: we are declared righteous in his sight, not on the basis of what we have done, but what he has done for us. By his faithfulness, we have been released from the judgment of the law and set free to live in fellowship with him.

Once we have realized this, we will come to read this psalm aright. Those who are being cast down and bound here are not ultimately human rulers. As Paul tells us, our enemies are not "of blood and flesh"; rather, we fight "against the cosmic powers of the present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Eph. 6:12). Our own sin must be bound and judged to prepare us for the Lord's coming. These prayers of vengeance direct our attention away from our earthly enemies and toward the one who has defeated sin, death, and Satan by his cross and resurrection. As we anticipate the commemoration of the Lord's death and resurrection and eagerly await his return, let us remember that he has already won the victory.

Prayer

O God, you have made of one blood all the peoples of the earth and have sent your blessed Son to preach to those who are far off and to those who are near. Grant that people everywhere may seek after you and find you; bring the nations into your fold; pour out your Spirit upon all flesh; and hasten the coming of your kingdom. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.