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# Learning to Curse

Daily recitation of the psalms continues to occupy a prominent place in the spiritual practices of religious as well as in the lives of many lay Christians. These hymns are a wellspring for spirituality, expressing the awe, anguish, gratitude, and longings of our individual and communal lives. The psalms strengthen our participation in the rich tradition of the Judaeo-Christian past. They join us in prayer with the communion of the faithful throughout the world. Moreover, the power of these familiar hymns surpasses their own recitation. In times of spiritual oasis, their formulaic lines inspire our own spontaneous prayer to burst forth. In times of spiritual wilderness, these solemn hymns provide words when our own words fail us.

Despite the richness it contributes to our spirituality, praying the psalms is not without peril. Many lines of these hymns disrupt and distract our reflection. Especially troublesome are the many texts with inflammatory language one’s enemies. Graphic images of violence characterize many of the psalms: “Slaughter them God… strike them down” (Ps 59:11); “O God, break the teeth in their mouths”(Ps 58:8-10); “Strike their loins with chronic palsy” (Ps 69:23). Sentiments of Hatred and vengeance charge these hostile expressions.

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The frequency with which one encounters these negative outpourings poses a serious problem. The difficulty unfolds on two fronts. First, we find the negative sentiments toward enemies at odds with Christian tradition. The teachings of Jesus not only contradict but rule out such curses. Jesus requires us to love our enemy (Mt 5:44; Lk 6:27) and pray for those who persecute us (Mt 5:44). These mandates are not invitations to naïve or uncritical behavior. The morality which Jesus sets forth grows out of a consciousness and context of justice. The recognition of evil and evildoers is a critical first step. The response to this recognition distinguishes the ethics of Jesus from the response to enemies in the psalms. In Jesus' teaching, the response to a recognized enemy must be an appropriate expression of love – healing, forgiveness, prayer, instruction. In the final moments of his life, Jesus recognizes his own enemies with precisely this kind of gesture. He prays for their forgiveness (Lk 23:34). In sharp contrast, lines from the psalms suggest a different course of action toward one's enemy. "May his children be orphans and his wife a widow" (Ps 109:6), and "let them vanish like water that runs away" (Ps 58:7). In these and many other psalms, the psalmist's recognition of the enemy evokes a curse. Such curses or imprecations are characteristic of many of the psalms.

Second, in the contemporary context of our prayer, the expression of hatred and revenge toward the enemy is especially disquieting. It is no secret that the precarious future of humanity rests in the bosom of our nuclear-ensnared world. In our time, pleading to God for the destruction of the enemy evokes images of the monstrous consequences associated with contemporary warfare. Prayer which begs the obliteration of the enemy ignores

the ethics incumbent on our era. From moment to moment, the survival of humanity hinges on our ability to resolve conflicts peacefully within society, across borders, and everywhere on the planet. Ultimately, we must constantly commit ourselves to the long and arduous process of redefining the enemy as sister and brother.

So then, how are religious and all Christians to claim the psalms for contemporary spirituality? Should we ignore the inflammatory lines? Or do we select only certain psalms for prayer? Moreover, are such decisions defensible? Is it theologically shortsighted, or, perhaps, theologically conscientious to exclude whole psalms or specific verses of these hymns from our spirituality?

Over the centuries, whole denominations such as the Eastern Orthodox communities and the Calvinists have recited every line of the Psalter. Until recently, Roman Catholic communities recited all one hundred and fifty psalms as well. In 1970, the Apostolic Constitution on the Divine Office explained why the revision of the Divine Office excluded many texts which cursed one's foes. A few of the psalms and the verses of others had been omitted because the were "somewhat harsh in tone… especially in the vernacular celebration." It seems that the revised edition intended to spare religious the offense of what they previously had prayed in Latin but had not understood. The exclusions include three lengthy laments (Ps 58, 83, 109) and selected verses from nineteen other laments. The deleted lines consist primarily of the curses against the enemy occurring in the laments.

Laments make up forty percent of the Psalter. They express the depths of anguish and fear in individual or communal travail. At the same time, they give voice to an undying confidence that Yahweh hears the cry of the oppressed. Biblical scholars identify the lament as a particular form of prayer among the psalms. Each lament consists of characteristic elements that include: 1) a cry for help; 2) a complaint that addresses three subjects – God, the sufferer, and the enemies; 3) a confession of trust that God will act on behalf of the sufferer; 4) a petition for God to take action against the enemy; 5) a declaration of assurance that God has heard the prayer; and 6) a vow of praise.

The curse or imprecation is situated in the complaint or the petition. It expresses a wish for the defeat, deprivation, deportation, desolation, or death of the enemy: "Let them go down to

Sheol in silence" (Ps 31:18); "Let their attacks bring shame to them" (Ps 69:23). These imprecations are a characteristic element of the lament. To exclude them distorts the form of the hymns. Moreover, such alterations may jeopardize the theological integrity of the prayers. Hence, the solution to such troublesome language may not reside in their selective omissions or in the revisions of the texts. Rather, it may entail a revision of our understanding of a curse.

**Catharsis**

In West Semitic use, curses uttered between individuals had the power to bring about what was said. The spoken word was endowed with a potential to pursue its subject inexorably. With this in mind, Balak, king of Moab, brought the seer Balaam to curse Israel (Nb 22:5). Similarly, David curses those who drive him into exile where he must worship foreign deities (1S 26:19). The curse language in the psalms bespeaks a different reality and dynamic. The psalmist recites the curse against a foe *before* God in the context of prayer. Uttered before God, the curse assumes its power from divine intervention. God could act to bring about the curse; God could render it ineffective (Nb 23:8); or God could even return the curse upon the one who recited it (Gn 12:3; 27:29). The actualization of the curse remains a divine prerogative. The expression of malediction toward the other is placed in the hands of God. It is God's decision alone to act upon it. When vengeful retaliation is surrendered to God, the curse assumes a different force.

Uttered in the context of prayer, the curse becomes a vehicle for catharsis. Recitations of these imprecations acknowledge the desperate emotions Israel felt before its captors in exile, before the militia that slaughtered its children, or before the hegemonic rulers who confiscated the land of its peasants. In the same way, reciting these curses against a foe allows us to express the objectionable but nevertheless real sentiments we harbor toward those

who cheat us in the workplace, toward those who harm our children, toward those who commit violence in our city, or toward those whose actions further impoverish the most vulnerable members of society. The candor, robustness, and intensity of our outcry gives voice to honest, undeniable emotions. Such cursing in the psalms not only gives voice to what otherwise might be suppressed hostility; its cathartic outcome also serves the more important end of paving a path to our own conversion.

**Conversion**

Human sinfulness is present everywhere in our world. Cursing is our initial response when we experience the pervasiveness of evil and our own helplessness in the face of it. Daily, the front pages of our newspapers suggest that the candidates for our curses are legion. But the imprecations in the psalms not only provide occasion to confront and damn the iniquity of our age; the recitation of the curse also makes us face the potential for sin in ourselves. By cursing our enemy, we give voice to our own capacity to hate, to do harm, and to desire ill for another. To censor these expressions of anger and hatred in prayer risks bypassing an important step on the road to conversion: the ability and honesty to detect sinfulness in ourselves.

Jesus called us to a change of heart whereby we love our enemies. To eliminate or pass over these curses where we express hatred of our foes impoverishes our potential to love them. Our ability to bless another is diminished if we cannot or are incapable of cursing. Similarly, our desire to love our enemies is impossible if we do not first acknowledge our hostility and feelings of hate toward them. The curse in the psalms provides an acceptable expression of these sentiments as we move toward this change of heart in our prayer.

**Communion**

"O Lord, you have probed me and you know me" (Ps 139:1). Human life is an open book before God. The One who created life searches and knows its depths and abysses. Can anything be hidden from the mind and heart of God? God knows all before we pray. Our prayer need not be scrutinized or sanitized. Praise, thanks, anguish, tears, lament, and cursing are

all admissible before the divine. To omit expressions of anger and outrage and to bypass recitations that bespeak our potential to hate and desire vengeance threaten the integrity of our relationship with God.

Moreover, cursing our enemies in prayer surrenders our option to act in an ungodly manner. Such prayer is the act of those who choose to place vengeance in the hands of God rather than to act vengefully themselves. In the form of a curse we recite before God feelings that we choose not to act upon. In so doing, we acknowledge that the divine assessment of evil and justice surpasses all human judgment. The deepest faith yields all power to God, in trust that God will do justice in God's own way.

Cursing in the context of prayer becomes an admission of our own finiteness and shortsightedness before God. The inhumane and immoral action we urge is the product of an undeniably human reaction. The curse is an expression of our emotional ensnarement, the concomitant distorted perceptions, and hence our inability to act justly. At the same time, it is an outcry of one who comes before God with the certainty of getting a hearing. It is a testimony of faith that we can tell God what is in the deepest recesses of our hearts and still believe that we will not be scorned or turned away. It is an act of utter confidence that we can rant and rave, express deadly sentiments, disclose the darkest side of our own interiority – and still be loved by God.

Like thanksgiving, praise, and expressions of need, curses in the psalms are a legitimate form of prayer. But they are not where the prayer ends. The lament psalms that house the curses against the enemy conclude with a statement of divine assurance or sometimes even a vow of praise. Hence, cursing is not a place we stay in our prayer. It is a stage we pass through on rout to a more important destination where we partake of comfort and communion with the divine:

> I look to no one else in heaven,
> I delight in nothing else on earth.
> My flesh and my heart are pining with love,
> My heart's Rock, by own God for ever!
> (Ps 73:25-26)

**Bibliographical Note**

Holladay, William, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) is an invaluable study on the use of the psalms in spirituality through the ages.