

# Candor in Prayer

The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James

Psalm 109:26-31

**Sermon Series:**  
**Pray Daily: Igniting**  
**Our Passion for God**

*How can I justify prayers that call upon God to pour out wrath on people?*

Words are vital in my profession. I read the Word; I preach the Word.

Words fascinate me, especially how they come together. Linguists tell us idioms are the hardest part of learning a language. Since English is a hybrid of so many languages, idioms have become a huge part of our vernacular.

The origin of idioms makes for fascinating reading. Take the English idiom, “Goody two shoes.” Have you ever wondered about the basis of that unusual phrase? It originates from a nursery rhyme written by Oliver Goldsmith in 1765. Goody owned only one shoe. When she was given a pair of shoes, she became so proud and pleased that she showed them to everyone, exclaiming “Goody has two shoes.” The phrase now describes a self-righteous, smugly virtuous person.

Some English phrases don’t translate well into other languages. Take the soft drink Coca-Cola, invented by a pharmacist back in 1876. Its name derives from two ingredients, cola leaves and coca nuts. When Coca-Cola was planning its move into the Chinese market in the 1920s, the company tried hard to match the product with appropriate Chinese characters. In Mandarin Chinese, there are roughly 200 characters that

could be strung together to form sounds similar to Coca-Cola. Chinese shopkeepers became impatient with the delay and hung up signs that matched Coca-Cola phonetically but whose literal meaning left something to be desired. Such was the case with one sign advertising Coca-Cola with words that meant, “Bite the wax tadpole.” Fortunately, Coke settled upon a more suitable arrangement of characters meaning, “Happiness is in the mouth.”

I like words. I’m something of a word geek, you might say. Recently I came across the word “imprecatory.” I discovered it in connection with a category of Psalms called imprecatory or cursing Psalms.

Most people don’t know what to do with these psalms, so we conveniently ignore them. Eugene Peterson calls this process by which we excise imprecatory psalms from our personal reading and public worship a “psalmectomy.” When was the last time you heard a sermon on an imprecatory psalm? I don’t ever remember preaching a sermon from the imprecatory psalms. I’m almost embarrassed by them. How can I justify prayers that call upon God to pour out wrath on people?

The Bible doesn’t give us permission to pick and choose parts we like while ignoring parts we don’t like. Paul writes, “All Scripture is

***If we feel these  
hateful  
emotions, why  
can't we pray  
them?***

profitable for teaching, admonishing, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

When I discovered children were reading today’s Scripture lesson, I was faced with something of an ethical dilemma. Should I ask children to read the PG-13 portions of Psalm 109 and incur the wrath of their parents? “Mommy and daddy, what does it mean to curse our enemies?”

“Oh, you know those Old Testament people. They were so, well, barbaric.”

You may be wondering how this psalm squares with Jesus’ words, “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the left also... You have heard that it was said love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:39, 43-44). When Jesus said, “Everything written in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled” (Luke 24:44), he didn’t issue a disclaimer on imprecatory psalms.

Let me read you a portion of Psalm 109 from *The Message*. Eugene Peterson has done a superb job translating the Bible’s ancient words into modern equivalents. We pick up the reading in verse 6:

“Give him a short life and give his job to someone else.

Make orphans of his children, dress his wife in widow’s weeds;

Turn his children into begging street urchins, evicted from their homes—homeless.

May the bank foreclose and wipe him out,

And strangers, like vultures, pick him clean.

May there be no one around to help him out,

No one willing to give his orphans a break.

Chop down his family tree

So that nobody even remembers his name.

But erect a memorial to the sin of his father

And make sure his mother’s name is there, too—

Their sins recorded forever before God,

But they themselves sunk into oblivion.

That’s all he deserves since he was never once kind,

Hounded the afflicted and heartbroken to their graves.

Since he loved cursing so much, let curses rain down;

Since he had no taste for blessing, let blessing be far from him.

He dressed up in curses like a fine suit of clothes;

He drank curses, took his bath in curses.

So give him a gift—a costume of curses;

He can wear curses every day of the week.”

Why are you looking at me like that! I didn’t write this—it’s in the Bible. Some of you are offended that anyone would have the audacity to pray this way. Such prayers are unworthy of any true Christian.

*When we pray  
with candor,  
we give God  
more  
opportunities to  
“have at us.”*

Not so fast. Most likely the psalmist, presumably David, is being falsely accused. If you know anything about King Saul’s insane accusations against David, suddenly, this prayer becomes a bit more believable!

Hatred is put on display in these verses for everyone to see. It dangles before us—festering and unvarnished.

Let’s be honest—all of us have such feelings. But hatred is not a pretty sight, so we camouflage it. We’d rather mutter hatred under our breaths. We dare not utter such emotions out loud in prayer. If we feel these hateful emotions, why can’t we pray them? Isn’t God a worthy repository of our retribution?

Most of us censor our prayers. We pray only about nice things. Let’s be honest, there’s plenty of pious posturing in prayer. If I hold my hands just right and say the right words, God will hear my prayers. If the psalmist doesn’t hide his most traumatic feelings from God in prayer, why should we?

The imprecatory psalms are Exhibit A reminders that the Bible deals with real life issues. The Bible speaks about real people with real emotions, including emotions of hate.

The imprecatory psalms teach us it’s better to pray our hate than suppress it. Suppressing our feelings is like holding a beach ball under water. We may be successful in keeping it submerged for awhile, but one of these days it’s

going to shoot unexpectedly to the surface.

The road to spiritual health must travel down some dark and foreboding paths. When we deny the reality of evil, there exists nothing to forgive. When we sanitize our prayers, we keep our hearts sealed from the Holy Spirit.

I said last Sunday the Psalms teach us to pray honestly. We can bring anything to God. Even our rage is carried into the presence of God. When we pray with candor, we give God more opportunities to “have at us.” Although we ask God to curse our enemies, God is not obliged to do what we pray.

There is a seismic shift that takes place within this prayer, introduced by the conjunction “but” in verse 21. “But you, O Lord, act on my behalf for your name’s sake; because your steadfast love is good, deliver me.” Once hatred is expressed, the psalmist surrenders his right to get even. Nowhere in the prayer does the psalmist take matters into his own hands. He never goes after his accusers; he leaves final assessment to God. What could have become a barbaric act of lashing out against his enemies becomes a faithful exercise of surrender. In the end, the Psalmist relinquishes his wrath to God.

Romans 12 is one of my all-time favorite Bible passages. In quick staccato fashion, Paul exalts the ethical qualities of a spirit-filled life. In the midst of this soaring passage, he writes, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room

***“The ferocious parts of the Psalms serve as a reminder that there is such a thing as wickedness and it is hateful to God.”***

- C. S. Lewis

for the wrath of God, for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord” (12:19). The end of this verse appears in quotation marks, since it is taken from the ancient book of Deuteronomy. “Vengeance is mine.” It’s not ours. Vengeance is solely God’s prerogative. We surrender our vindictiveness to the one who has the sole right to exercise wrath.

You may be saying, this psalm doesn’t concern me. I’ve never felt like this. Well then, whose psalm is it? Perhaps we could pray it on behalf of abused children or rape victims or religious refugees. In the words of C. S. Lewis, “The ferocious parts of the Psalms serve as a reminder that there is such a thing as wickedness and it is hateful to God.” Justice is the flip side of God’s compassion. It is a longing to see God’s righteousness revealed. God upholds those who do what is right and resists those who do what is wrong.

Philip Yancey tells a story in his book on prayer about Elizabeth, his four-year-old neighbor, who is staying with her grandmother while her parents are in New York City on business. Kneeling by her bed that night, Elizabeth prays, “Help mommy and daddy to come home safely. And if they don’t want to come home....” Her grandmother interrupts, “Honey, of course they want to come home.” Elizabeth sets her straight with her tart reply, “Grandma, I’m not talking to you; I’m talking to God.” Candor comes easily to children. They know instinctively it’s perfectly

appropriate to voice everything directly to God.

