



Psalm 109 - Prayer for Vindication and Vengeance

To the leader. Of David. A Psalm.

Introduction

This is an individual lament, geared to a situation in which a faithful Israelite is suffering the attacks of vicious accusers who return evil to him for the good he has done to them. It contains an extensive prayer that his accusers or their chief would receive what they deserve, and finishes with a prayer that appeals to, and rests confidently on, God's steadfast love. An important repeated word is 'accuse', indicating the invidious situation.

The tone and content of this psalm are reminiscent of Psalm 69. A major difference is that the sufferer in Psalm 69 acknowledges that wrongs he has done have played a role in his troubles, while the sufferer in Psalm 109 professes innocence. This facilitates its application to Jesus and to Judas. Although readers may instinctively feel that Jesus would not have said such things about his betrayer and those who plotted against him, the Gospels do include his harsh condemnations of Judas: <<*The Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born*>> (Matthew 26:24 and Mark 14:21); and of Pilate and the Jewish leaders: <<*Jesus answered him, 'You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above; therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin'*>> (John 19:11). Jesus asked only for the soldiers to be forgiven: <<*Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing*>> (Luke 23:34a). Nevertheless both contain curses on the enemies, and both are appropriated by Christians with Psalm 69:25 and 109:8 being quoted in Acts 1:20. In both psalms the 'enemies' are influential Israelites who are unfaithful to the covenant. The same principle applies to David's authorship as with Psalm

69, namely, that this is a prayer well-suited to each of God's people in analogous situations.

This psalm is thought to be the strongest of what are known as the Imprecatory Psalms, David's songs that call down curses upon his enemies. It is important to remember that these are prayers, committing vengeance unto God. With the greater revelation of grace and truth that came by Jesus Christ, Christians understand that they are to pray for the good of their enemies, and not their cursing. Yet, Christians should remind themselves that David refused to act upon these curses, instead leaving vengeance up to God. This is especially relevant regarding David, who knew what it was to take life with the sword. If David withheld vengeance, it was because he chose to, not because he lacked the opportunity, skill, or courage: <<*Afterwards David was stricken to the heart because he had cut off a corner of Saul's cloak. He said to his men, 'The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the Lord's anointed.'* So David scolded his men severely and did not permit them to attack Saul. Then Saul got up and left the cave, and went on his way>> (1 Samuel 24:5-7).

Psalm 109:1-5 - I Need Help against Those Who Accuse Me.

The opening section describes the situation: people attack the singer without cause; they accuse him in return for his love. The singer has shown the accusers love and good, which they repay with evil and hatred. The psalm offers the right response: David gave himself to prayer, both prayers for his enemies in the past and now in prayer for God's help in the present.

- 1 Do not be silent, O God of my praise.
- 2 For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me,
speaking against me with lying tongues.
- 3 They beset me with words of hate,
and attack me without cause.

Psalm 109:1-3

Do not be silent, i.e. "Let people not think that you are complacent toward evil" David was once again in trouble, beset by many enemies. The mouths of wicked and deceitful men spoke against him, so he prayed that God would not be silent. He did not want the mouth of the deceitful to have the last word; refer also to Psalm 28:1, 35:22, 39:12, 50:3, and 83:1.

O God of my praise, i.e. "The God whom I praise." This is reflected in: <<*He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome*

things that your own eyes have seen>> (Deuteronomy 10:21), and: <<*My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long*>> (Psalm 71:8). Derek Kidner commented, “A resolute stand taken before the troubled thoughts surge in. The psalm will feel its way back to this vantage point, but only regain it in the last two verses.”

They beset me with words of hate, and attack me without cause. David was confident in his own innocence in reference to his enemies. Their harsh words were spoken with a lying tongue, and their words of hatred were without a cause. Charles Spurgeon commented, “In all Satan’s armoury there are no worse weapons than deceitful tongues.”

⁴ In return for my love they accuse me,
even while I make prayer for them.

⁵ So they reward me evil for good,
and hatred for my love.

Psalm 109:4-5

In return for my love they accuse me. In the previous verses David insisted that the hatred of his enemies against him was without cause. Here he further explained that he extended love to these adversaries, but they gave David evil for good, and hatred for love.

Even while I make prayer for them. This shows that David’s response was proper, even in a NT understanding. The following verses are filled with bitter wishes that form something of a prophecy of doom against these enemies. Yet David did nothing to bring this doom against these enemies. That was God’s work, not his own, as Paul also taught: <<*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’*>> (Romans 12:19). As for David, he would give himself to prayer and leave it with the Lord. Spurgeon noted, “He did nothing else but pray. He became prayer as they became malice. This was his answer to his enemies, he appealed from men and their injustice to the Judge of all the earth, who must do right.”

So they reward me evil for good is a theme reflected elsewhere in Scripture: <<*When they had gone only a short distance from the city, Joseph said to his steward, ‘Go, follow after the men; and when you overtake them, say to them, “Why have you returned evil for good? Why have you stolen my silver cup?”*>> (Genesis 44:4), <<*He said to David, ‘You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil’*>> (1 Samuel 24:17), <<*They repay me evil for good; my soul is forlorn*>> (Psalm 35:12), <<*Those who render me evil for good are my adversaries because I follow after good*>> (Psalm 38:20), and: <<*Evil will not depart from the house of one who returns*

evil for good>> (Proverbs 17:13). Since Bible authors generally tell the faithful not to return evil for evil in their interpersonal dealings: <<*Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; wait for the Lord, and he will help you*>> (Proverbs 20:22), <<*Do not say, 'I will do to others as they have done to me; I will pay them back for what they have done'*>> (Proverbs 24:29), <<*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*>> (Romans 12:21), and: <<*See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all*>> (1 Thessalonians 5:15), it is clear that to return evil for good is heinous.

Psalm 109:6-20 - May He Suffer What He Deserves.

This section asks God to vindicate his faithful one by bringing on the enemies the troubles that they deserve and that which they have been bringing on the faithful. This is clear from the way that wicked man and accuser echo v.2 and v.4: they have opened wicked mouths against the psalmist and they accuse him, so therefore let them suffer the same fate.

Like the curse of Psalm 69:22-28 (refer to the comments made there), the description here uses imagery to depict a life that is devastated and sad in its various aspects: a shortened life, poverty for himself and his dependents, no posterity, and no forgiveness, which goes beyond merely temporal punishments. As with Psalm 69, one must recall that the people cursed are grievous sinners, covenant members who are unfaithful to the covenant, who would use whatever means they can to oppress the faithful. Further, the unstated assumption is that they will not repent; refer to the comments made on Psalm 5:10 and 35:4-8.

- ⁶ They say, 'Appoint a wicked man against him;
let an accuser stand on his right.
- ⁷ When he is tried, let him be found guilty;
let his prayer be counted as sin.
- ⁸ May his days be few;
may another seize his position.

Psalm 109:6-8

Appoint a wicked man against him. Although vv.2-5 speak of attackers (plural), vv.6-19 speak of only one using the singular forms he, him and his, then v.20 returns to the plural. Possibly the singular focuses on the chief attacker, an officeholder of some kind (v.8), or else it is to apply to each and every one of the group. When David prophesied doom over his enemy, he began with the wish that in judgement he would be ruled by a wicked man. Ungodly leadership is a form of God's judgement upon a people. This begins a long and intense set of curses that David pronounced against his enemy. There are some who think that vv.6-20

describe the lying words that David's enemies spoke against him, and that the use of the singular in that section proves it, as well as v.20 itself.

The main argument against this approach is how Peter quoted v.8, applying it to an evil man rightly condemned, i.e. Judas, and not against an innocent man wrongly condemned. It is fair to note that the tone of these curses is generally in the form of prophecies more than immediate curses. It is thought that David more predicted the righteous judgement to come rather than pronouncing it – although, he certainly wished for this judgement.

Let an accuser stand on his right. The curse David had in mind was of an accuser or adversary standing in the place of aid and help; that the guilty one would be left without help and instead have Satan at his right hand, considering that the Hebrew word for accuser is *Satan*.

When he is tried, let him be found guilty. David thought of every possible calamity that could come upon his enemy. In the court of law he would be guilty. When he prayed, the prayer itself would become sin. His life would be short and another would take his place.

May another seize his position or take his office. That is, his 'office of oversight,' a position also reflected in: <<*Eleazar son of Aaron the priest was to be chief over the leaders of the Levites, and to have oversight of those who had charge of the sanctuary*>> (Numbers 3:32), <<*Of the Hebronites, Hashabiah and his brothers, one thousand seven hundred men of ability, had the oversight of Israel west of the Jordan for all the work of the Lord and for the service of the king*>> (1 Chronicles 26:30), and: <<*They shall be ministers in my sanctuary, having oversight at the gates of the temple, and serving in the temple; they shall slaughter the burnt-offering and the sacrifice for the people, and they shall attend on them and serve them*>> (Ezekiel 44:11), a responsible position among the people of God. In Acts 1:20, Peter combined this verse with Psalm 69:25 (refer to the comment made there) to explain why someone else should take Judas' 'office of oversight,' Greek *episkopē*: a position that Paul also refers to: <<*Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an overseer desires a noble task*>> (1 Timothy 3:1 NIV).

⁹ May his children be orphans,
and his wife a widow.

¹⁰ May his children wander about and beg;
may they be driven out of the ruins they inhabit.

¹¹ May the creditor seize all that he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.

- 12 May there be no one to do him a kindness,
nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.
- 13 May his posterity be cut off;
may his name be blotted out in the second generation.

Psalm 109:9-13

May his children be orphans, and his wife a widow. The man's early death (v.8) has its inevitable effect of impoverishing his dependents, which is in stark contrast to: <<*I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread*>> (Psalm 37:25). Each member of the people is linked to others, and the unfaithfulness of one makes others suffer, especially those closest to him: <<*yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation*>> (Exodus 34:7b). Again, the assumption is that neither the man nor his family escapes the judgement through repentance.

Spurgeon stated, "We are staggered to find the children included in the father's sentence, and yet as a matter of fact children do suffer for their father's sins, and, as long as the affairs of this life are ordered as they are, it must be so."

May his posterity be cut off. Part of the blessing of being Israel is the prospect of one's family line continuing: <<*and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel*>> (Deuteronomy 25:6), with one's descendants under God's perfect care: <<*Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations*>> (Deuteronomy 7:9), <<*But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children, to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments*>> (Psalm 103:17-18). The unfaithful may forfeit that blessing.

- 14 May the iniquity of his father be remembered before the Lord,
and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out.
- 15 Let them be before the Lord continually,
and may his memory be cut off from the earth.
- 16 For he did not remember to show kindness,

- but pursued the poor and needy
and the broken-hearted to their death.
- 17 He loved to curse; let curses come on him.
He did not like blessing; may it be far from him.
- 18 He clothed himself with cursing as his coat,
may it soak into his body like water,
like oil into his bones.
- 19 May it be like a garment that he wraps around himself,
like a belt that he wears every day.’
- 20 May that be the reward of my accusers from the Lord,
of those who speak evil against my life.

Psalm 109:14-20

May the iniquity of his father be remembered before the Lord, and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out. David hoped that the sins of his enemy’s ancestors would also be held against him, and that the remembrance of those sins would be continually before the Lord. Refer also to the comment made on Psalm 69:27-28.

For he did not remember to show kindness. This is the explanation for v.12. Covenant faithfulness is most clearly seen in showing kindness to the most vulnerable, i.e. the poor and needy and the broken-hearted, especially those among one’s fellow members of God’s people; the cursed person has repudiated this, seeking to harm and exploit them instead.

He loved to curse; let curses come on him. He did not like blessing; may it be far from him. David’s prayer was rooted in simple justice. He wanted God to do to this enemy what that guilty man had done to others. David wanted the man to be clothed with curses. For the theme of proportional reversal, refer to Psalm 7:15, 9:15, 57:6, and Proverbs 28:10.

Spurgeon observed, “Retaliation, not for private revenge, but as a measure of public justice, is demanded by the Psalmist and deserved by the crime. Surely the malicious man cannot complain if he is judged by his own rule, and has his corn measured with his own bushel.”

May that be the reward of my accusers from the Lord. Now the psalm returns to the whole group of enemies. This emphasises that this is a prayer from David. As he said in v.4, he would pray and leave the matter to the Lord. David wished and

prophesied this doom; but it would be God's job to perform it. Adam Clarke commented, "All these maledictions shall be fulfilled on my enemies; they shall have them for their reward."

Psalm 109:21-29 - Deliver Me from Their Accusations.

The next section asks for God's protection from the attacks, and for the accusers to be disgraced, i.e. to be rendered ineffective in their power to intimidate and harm. The appeal is to God's steadfast love and to the singer's own powerlessness. The ideal would be for the accusers to know that this is God's hand; this will put them to shame and might even lead to their repentance: <<*Let them be put to shame and dismayed for ever; let them perish in disgrace. Let them know that you alone, whose name is the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth*>> (Psalm 83:17-18).

- 21 But you, O Lord my Lord,
act on my behalf for your name's sake;
because your steadfast love is good, deliver me.
- 22 For I am poor and needy,
and my heart is pierced within me.
- 23 I am gone like a shadow at evening;
I am shaken off like a locust.
- 24 My knees are weak through fasting;
my body has become gaunt.
- 25 I am an object of scorn to my accusers;
when they see me, they shake their heads.

Psalm 109:21-25

But you, O Lord my Lord, act on my behalf for your name's sake. David understood that it was not enough to have his enemy judged. He needed help from God, from Yahweh Adonai. David asked on the basis of God's name and mercy, not on the basis of his own righteousness.

For I am poor and needy. This links back to v.16, where David is one of the persecuted; and to v.31, where he is nevertheless assured of God's care.

My heart is pierced within me. David was poor and needy, and shows that he was the one broken in heart mentioned in v.16.

I am gone like a shadow at evening. David's misery was also physical. He felt his life was wasting away, complaining my body has become gaunt. The hateful enemy either caused this physical weakness or took advantage of it.

When they see me, they shake their heads. People looked at David in his sorry condition and despised him for he had become an object of scorn, they were shaking their heads in both pity and disgust. Jesus would face this same kind of treatment but to a much greater extent: <<*Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross'*>> (Matthew 27:39-40).

26 Help me, O Lord my God!

Save me according to your steadfast love.

27 Let them know that this is your hand;

you, O Lord, have done it.

28 Let them curse, but you will bless.

Let my assailants be put to shame; may your servant be glad.

29 May my accusers be clothed with dishonour;

may they be wrapped in their own shame as in a mantle.

Psalm 109:26-29

Help me, O Lord my God! David's plea was straightforward and simple. Like the woman of Canaan with the demon-possessed daughter he asked God for help: <<*Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, 'Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.'* He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' But she came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me'>> (Matthew 15:21-25). Again, he asked for it on the basis of God's mercy, not on merit.

Let them know that this is your hand. It was very important to David that his enemies and all who looked on him knew that his rescue was from God's hand, that the Lord had done it. He did not want deliverance only for his own sake, but also for the glory of God.

You, O Lord, have done it. As just noted, David wanted his enemies to know that it was the Lord and not he who was punishing them for their wickedness and

deceit. Spurgeon observed, “Ungodly men will not see God’s hand in anything if they can help it, and when they see good men delivered into their power they become more confirmed than ever in their atheism; but all in good time God will arise and so effectually punish their malice and rescue the object of their spite that they will be compelled to say like the Egyptian magicians, ‘this is the finger of God.’”

Let them curse, but you will bless. David understood that the curses of his enemies could never triumph over the blessing of God upon his life. This would make David rejoice and his enemies to be clothed with dishonour, wearing their disgrace as if it were a mantle. The safety of the faithful when the unfaithful curse is reflected in the words: <<*Like a sparrow in its flitting, like a swallow in its flying, an undeserved curse goes nowhere*>> (Proverbs 26:2).

Psalm 109:30-31 - I Will Give Thanks to God Who Protects Me.

The psalm closes with hope, the singer confident that he will give great thanks to the Lord in public worship so that all the faithful can join in the praise. He will be found in the midst of the throng in worship, rather than fall prey to those who condemn his soul to death.

³⁰ With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord;
I will praise him in the midst of the throng.

³¹ For he stands at the right hand of the needy,
to save them from those who would condemn them to death.

Psalm 109:30-31

With my mouth I will give great thanks to the Lord. David’s heart was to see God honoured in his deliverance. He would praise God vocally and publically in the midst of the throng: <<*I will give you thanks in the great assembly; among the throngs I will praise you*>> (Psalm 35:18 NIV).

For he stands at the right hand of the needy. God is to be praised for his love and care for the poor and for those oppressed by such hateful enemies, those who would condemn the righteous. Contrast this with the unfaithful man (v.6), for whom the psalm prays that someone else will stand at his right hand! Kidner observed, “Replacing the figure of the accuser, who stands at the right hand of his victim, by the figure of God who stands at the right hand of the needy in a very different sense. It is the complete answer.”