

were you when I needed you! Kudos to Mr. Carver for his undertaking. This book, I repeat, needs wide circulation among seminary students and pastors. *The Chief Divine Service* by Friedrich Lochner, translated by Matthew Carver (CPH, 2020). 314pp, retails at \$39.99. ✱

Commentary on the War: Toward Gaining Ground in the Ministry

A Defense of Prayers for Vengeance

David H. Petersen



Christians don't live in Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood where anger can simply be diverted into a lump of clay or counting can dispel negative feelings. We are rarely under direct attack or in physical danger for our faith, but we have real enemies. And there are, of course, places in the modern world—and throughout history—where our brothers and sisters in Christ are suffering direct attacks for their faith and are in physical danger. It is not unimaginable that we too might eventually face such things.

Even without such direct or physical threats, we are called upon to pray the Psalms, and we do have enemies. Our enemies are anything and anyone who opposes God's justice and love, including our old Adam. To pray against our enemies is to recognize that we are engaged in spiritual warfare and that we need help. We need God to break and hinder every evil plan and purpose of the devil, the world, and our sinful nature. The Psalms that ask for vengeance upon our enemies are worthy of being prayed. They teach us to not only face reality, but also to trust Christ's promise that we are His people and that He will return in glory and judgment for us.

Whether modern Christians find it convenient or not, God's enemies and our enemies are omnipresent in the Psalms. This is most obvious in what are often called the "imprecatory psalms," particularly Psalms 69, 109, and 137, but the concept and calls for vengeance are not limited to those alone. The *Lutheran Service Book* does not include psalms 69, 109, and 137, but goes even further by also leaving out 12, 35, 37, 52, 57, 58, 59, 79, 83, and 94, all of which feature cries for justice against enemies. In this way much of the mention of enemies is avoided, but even so, *LSB* could not eliminate it completely. As J. Clinton McCann notes, forty-six of the first seventy-two psalms are generally classified as laments or complaints and every one of them mentions enemies.¹ McCann gives a list of the various words for "enemies" in the NRSV's translation of the Psalms: "the

wicked," "the foes," "the bloodthirsty," "evildoers," "workers of evil," "pursuers," "fools," "hypocrites," "adversaries," "false witnesses," "malicious witnesses," "ruffians," "wrongdoers," "those who seek my life," "the proud," "the arrogant," "assailants," "the insolent," "the ruthless," "bulls," "dogs," and "lions." The Psalms also complain about "apparent friends, companions, and neighbors" becoming enemies.

LSB does include Psalms with specific requests for judgment and punishment on enemies by including Psalms 5, 6, 11, 40, 54, 56, 139, and 143. Consider, for example, Psalm 5:10. It is quite pointed in the KJV: "Destroy thou them, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; cast them out in the multitude of their transgressions; for they have rebelled against thee." The ESV, and therefore *LSB*, does soften it significantly. Still, the point can't be completely missed: "Make them bear their guilt, O God; let them fall by their own counsels; because of the abundance of their transgressions cast them out, for they have rebelled against you."

God has provided these prayers because we need them. Perhaps He has provided them in such abundance so that they would be hard to ignore. In any case, if one picks up the Psalter against his enemies, he will discover great vitriol such as is bound to seem, at first glance, as patently unchristian. In Matthew 5:44 Jesus teaches us to pray for and love our enemies, to bless those who curse us. This command is representative of a clear shift in the New Testament prayer from the Old Testament. We still want our enemies to be overcome, but the emphasis is now on conversion as opposed to destruction. This is how Jesus prays for us who were His enemies from the cross.²

We pray for the conversion and forgiveness of our human enemies. At the same time, prayer requires honesty. We are opening our hearts to God, knowing that the Christ has been judged in our stead and that God will not hate us for our filth. Thus, we are free to admit what we really want. We can name our pain and our desire for vengeance. We can also be realistic as to what we expect to come of our enemies if they do not repent. We know there will be goats on the last day. We know that there will be people who take the mark of the beast and refuse to worship the Lamb. They will be destroyed, and we will be glad for it. We don't know exactly who will suffer that horrific fate, and we don't stop praying for anyone's conversion in this life unless we know he has committed the sin against the Holy Spirit and has hardened his heart against God (1 John 5:16-17). Nonetheless, we pray for the end. We pray for the destruction of our enemies. We do this because we want it and because it is part of God's revealed will. We trust that His will is always good.

That being said, not every enemy has committed the sin against the Holy Spirit or is even an unbeliever who hates what we believe. Some of our enemies are fellow

believers. On a daily scale, our human enemies, whether they are Christians or not, are not the people that want to kill us and burn our corpses but the people who simply want us to suffer a bit. They are the people who mean us mostly small harms. They might be gossiping about us to undermine us with our friends or to keep us from getting credit that we are due at work, or they might be making us feel foolish in front of our children. They might hurt our feelings with mean little remarks or innuendos. They might just ignore us or not include us. Whether it is in the bowling league, at work, or under the Christmas tree at the in-laws, we all have enemies. We are not completely at peace in this world, at the grocery store, or even with our group of friends. That is why this world is hard to navigate and we are so stressed all the time. So pray about it! Cast your burdens upon the Lord. Acknowledge your fears and worries and failures. Name your enemies. Pray for their conversion and your reconciliation, for peace. Hand it over to God.

Again, we should not hide our true selves from God in prayer. Instead we should confess our sins and repent, asking for strength to change, to do better. Loving your enemies on the one hand, and on the other, trusting in God to take vengeance where it is good, is not easy. We ask God not only to change our enemies but also to change us, to make us more like Him, teaching us not only patience and forgiveness but also the humility to accept His will.

We can and should also spiritualize these psalms. While we have physical enemies that should not be overlooked in our prayer life, we should see demons and abstract temptations, along with our own old Adam, as our enemies too. The request that God destroy them is the request to be free of temptation and a prayer against ourselves for our disgusting complicity. We are our own worst enemy.

Finally, God makes the Son His enemy in our place. His wrath is carried out against Him. We love this avenging act of atonement and rejoice in it. Christ became a worm and no man, was despised and rejected, burnt whole, forsaken by the Father, had His teeth kicked in, to make us His friends. In asking that sin and death be destroyed, we are asking that Jesus be destroyed to atone for us and take away our sins. There is also the sense in which Jesus Himself prayed these Psalms against His enemies and for us against our enemies, as well.

In the end, the prayer against all these enemies is a confession that we are in a mess and need God's help. We don't know what the best course is, for we are contaminated. We are men of unclean lips and we live among a people of unclean lips. But we do know that God is not as nice as Mr. Rogers. He won't pooh-pooh this all away. He doesn't conform to modern sensibilities about fairness or niceness. Instead, He is good and holy and just. There is no amount of education or reason that

will fix the world and our myriad problems. This world and our mess needs to be destroyed and remade, even as Jesus was crucified and is risen. It is an act of humility and of faith to accept this remedy and to ask for it, naming it for what it is. In praying the imprecatory Psalms or asking in our own words for God to relieve us of our enemies we do just this.

We need to pray for this divine vengeance upon our enemies because we need to be conformed to the totality of Scripture and not just the parts that are easy. We need to do the theological work and take an honest look at ourselves, our emotions, and our limitations. We need God to be God so that we can be His subjects and not try to set ourselves up as His judges. There are mysteries beyond our comprehension, but we know that God is good and that in Christ He is working all things together for us.

Let us consider Psalm 58 as an example of how the Scriptures teach us to indeed pray for God's vengeance upon our enemies.

- ¹ Do you indeed speak righteousness, you silent ones?
Do you judge uprightly, you sons of men?
- ² No, in heart you work wickedness;
You weigh out the violence of your hands in the earth.
- ³ The wicked are estranged from the womb;
They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.
- ⁴ Their poison *is* like the poison of a serpent;
They are like the deaf cobra *that* stops its ear,
- ⁵ Which will not heed the voice of charmers,
Charming ever so skillfully.
- ⁶ Break their teeth in their mouth, O God!
Break out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!
- ⁷ Let them flow away as waters *which* run continually;
When he bends *his* bow,
Let his arrows be as if cut in pieces.
- ⁸ *Let them be* like a snail which melts away as it goes,
Like a stillborn child of a woman, that they may not see the sun.
- ⁹ Before your pots can feel *the burning* thorns,
He shall take them away as with a whirlwind,
As in His living and burning wrath.
- ¹⁰ The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance;
He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked,
- ¹¹ So that men will say,
"Surely *there is* a reward for the righteous;
Surely He is God who judges in the earth." (NKJV)

Here is how the Psalm moves. Verses 1–5 acknowledge the situation. This is what our enemies are like: judging, plotting violence, liars, poisonous, foolish. They are not happy in this but are estranged even from

one another and suffer something of their lifestyle in uncertainty and unhappiness.

Then comes the petition in verse 6. This is the heart of the Psalm, the point of it: “Break their teeth, O God.” And there is more. Melt them like water. Turn their own arrows against them. Melt them like snails being covered in salt. And worst of all: let them be like stillborn children, not only dead, but the cause of great pain to their people.

If you talked about the mean girls at school that way your mother would wash your mouth out with soap. But this isn’t polite conversation. This is prayer. The Psalmist is opening his heart to God, trusting in God’s kindness. He trusts that God will look past his slobbering, gasping, boogery cries. He is telling the truth about how he feels even though some of what he feels is tainted with sin and inappropriate. Prayer to Jesus is truly a safe space. The Psalmist lets this all out without any inclination to take things into his own hands. Instead, he hands it all over to God. Vengeance is God’s, not ours. We wait on Him.

And, of course, it is not just a request. It is also a complaint. Why did God let this happen? Why did He let it get this bad? Why hasn’t He already intervened and when is He going to get to it? When you are a member of the family, you have the right to complain. This is the right of children born of familial intimacy. It comes from true confidence in the Father’s love.

Finally, in verses 9–11 there is a confession of God’s ultimate goodness. He will have vengeance at the right time and in the right way. He will not suffer this to continue forever. Jesus has been vindicated in the Resurrection. We will be also. There is a reward for the righteous. This is not a wish or a pipe dream, or some hippy vision of karma where justice finally wins out. This is a divine promise: God’s wrath has been visited upon Christ. Nothing bad should happen to us. The earth itself is ours. Christ will return to will judge the earth and make things better than right. He will destroy our enemies and vindicate us, revealing that we are the children of God and honoring us for our faith and good works.

The last verse in particular is a promise. This is how we walk away from our need for vengeance and safety, how we cast it all upon God and trust Him to take care of it. Here is the peace and calm that comes out of this prayer: “Surely *there is* a reward for the righteous; Surely He is God who judges in the earth.” ✠

Notes

¹ McCann, “Greed, Grace, and Gratitude: An Approach to the Psalms,” in *Performing the Psalms* (2005), 51–56.

² To this argument, see Patrick D. Miller’s chapter on the development of New Testament prayer in *They Cried to the Lord* (1994), 307ff.

A Small Increase in Prices

It’s been ten years since we did this, so we hope and expect our avid readership to be okay with it. We decided it was time for a little increase in prices (see our chart on page 3). Compared to the increases in hamburger prices, or a movie, it’s not that much. Besides, it’s still a steal. And the reason it’s a steal is that we have such good donors upon whom we regularly depend. Can you help? As ever, a \$50 donation will get you any item of your choosing in our online store. Just let us know what you want! Also, a \$200 donation will get you any item in our store *plus* a lifetime subscription to *Gottesdienst*.

We’re still hammering out frequent blog posts; we’ve rekindled our well-loved podcast; and our website has a liturgical bibliography, a wedding manual, our annual liturgical calendar, and our widely appreciated Divine Service Training Video for pastors and seminarians, all of which is still free. And we still trumpet the same defense, the same liturgy, the same Gospel—seeking first of all to remain faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you! ✠

Taking Pains

Reverence is not primarily a matter of feeling pious, but rather of taking pains. – The Anglican Breviary

Consecration, Pax, and Distribution

Mark P. Braden

In the Easter 2019 issue of Gottesdienst, this column began a series on the rubrics for the reverent conduct of the Mass. We continue the series this issue with the completion of the Consecration, the Pax Domini, and the Distribution.



he Verba Domini and attendant ceremonies completed, if the Consecration is set inside of a Eucharistic Prayer, that Prayer is now continued. In Luther’s Latin Mass, the 1523 *Formula Missae et Communionis pro Ecclesia Vuittembergensi*, he himself placed the Sanctus, sung by the choir, and the *Benedictus qui venit* (“Blessed is He that cometh . . .”) after the Consecration, followed by the Lord’s Prayer. The Elevation was done during the Benedictus. After the Lord’s Prayer the Pax Domini was to follow immediately.¹

Paul Zeller Strodach, who translated Luther’s Latin Mass into English, provides an Anamnesis (a prayer of remembrance of the salvific works of Christ, which re-