

Epigraph

*All day long they seek to injure my cause;
all their thoughts are against me for evil.
They band themselves together, they lurk,
they watch my steps.
As they have waited for my life,*

*so recompense them for their crime;
in wrath cast down the peoples, O God!*

PSALMS 56:5-7

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

JESUS (MATTHEW 6:13)

I think that taking life seriously means something such as this; that whatever man does on this planet has to be done in the lived truth of the terror of creation, of the grotesque, of the rumble of panic underneath everything. Otherwise it is false.

ERNEST BECKER

8. Enemies

There is a pseudo-prayer that promises its practitioners entrance into the subliminal harmonies of the way-things-are, putting them in tune with the general hum of the universe. This so-called prayer reduces tension, lowers stress, and extends longevity. The people who get good at it are calm, their voices soothing, and their actions poised. They meditate beautiful thoughts and sleep well. They cultivate the way of peace.

Psalm-prayer also enters into the way-things-are, but finds that the way-things-are is pretty bad. Evil is encountered. Wickedness is confronted. This prayer quickens the pulse and shoots adrenaline into the bloodstream. The people who practice this prayer get excited—they yell and gesture. They are engaged, or soon to be engaged, in an act of war. Prayer is combat. Prayer brings us before God—and there, before God, we find ourselves grappling with “the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12).

There are harmonies to be experienced in prayer, but they are all achieved harmonies, not natural ones. They are hard-won in Genesis creations, Peniel wrestlings, and Gethsemane struggles. If there are surface calms in our lives and in society, and there often are for some, a dive beneath the surface shows forces locked in combat.

People who are looking for a spiritual soporific don’t pray the Psalms, or at least don’t pray them for very long. The Psalms are full of unsettling enemy talk. God is the primary subject in the Psalms, but enemies are established in solid

second place. Why should this be? How does it happen that in the very place we find the most intense concern for God and the most developed converse with him that is imaginable, right alongside without buffer or warning, there is this inordinate preoccupation with enemies? Shouldn’t an overpowering sense of God’s presence, his power and salvation, shrink human difficulties into insignificance? And shouldn’t an immersion in the great realities of mercy transform every retaliatory impulse into an evangel that makes us “love everybody” as the old-time religion does for country singers?

It is not unreasonable to suppose that the life of prayer will draw us into a genial camaraderie, so secure in God’s grace and confident in his beneficence that we are irresistibly carried along in the flow of the river of God, viewing everyone and everything with the cheeriest of feelings. But reason, at least reason inexperienced and untested in the life of prayer, isn’t the best guide in these matters. When we take the Psalms as our guide, we find that people who pray have a lot of enemies, and that they spend a lot of their praying time dealing with them.

Most of us would prefer it otherwise. We commonly indulge our preference by subjecting the Psalms to severe editing, cutting away any negativism that offends piety and disturbs the peace. The editing is usually unconscious, accomplished by the simple expedient of withdrawing the imagination and sliding over the offensive passages.¹ Psalm 137 is on nearly everyone’s list for revision. Psalm 137 is the scandal of the Psalter.

The Scandal Psalm

Psalm 137 was first prayed out of Israel’s painful exile. There are three stanzas. The first two stanzas are poignant: these lyrics draw us into creative and mysterious depths where a human being in the very act of being humiliated is ennobled, in the course of being violated is exalted.

"By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept" opens the first stanza. In the loneliness of exile, the Israelites with their far-flung reputation for robust song and hearty praise are grist for Babylonia taunts: "Sing us one of your Zion songs!" But all the music has been knocked out of them. Their lives and voices are flat as the desert plain of their exile.

Stanza two deepens the sorrow: "How shall I sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Silence is their only dignity. To sing in this place, among these people, would be a sacrilege. They will be loyal to their homeland and honor the memories of their grand and holy place of worship in reverberating silence.

In these two stanzas, the fine-tempered steel forged in the exile sufferings of loss, rejection, and violation is fashioned into sharp images and penetrating rhythms that cut to the center of our hearts and make us companions in their weeping prayer and silent pain. Their pathos and art bring us to our knees in prayer with and for them. Then there is this:

*Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem.
how they said, "Rase it, rase it!
Down to its foundations!"
O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall he be who requites you
with what you have done to us!
Happy shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rocks!*

Psalms 1 and 2, set as an introduction to the Psalms in order to draw us into the way of prayer, began and ended with the word blessed, or happy (*ashrey*). Psalm 1 directed us to the practice of torah-meditation, giving our full attention to the word that God speaks to us so that in prayer we will not be distracted by what everyone else is talking about, but attentive in answering the God who is talking to us. Persons who do this meditative listening and answering are called blessed. Psalm

2 directs us to the practice of messiah-expectation, paying attention to the way God enters into history in human form and establishes his rule so that we will not be intimidated by the bully bravado of unbelieving rulers. Persons who trust in this messianic presence are called blessed.

Psalm 137 uses this same word—blessed, happy (*ashrey*)—twice in its climax lines. It uses it in the contextual way that has been firmly established through torah-meditation and messiah-expectation, but it is now put to the service of enemy-denunciation: "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks!"

This is raw hate. Nothing in the preceding lines of Psalm 137 has prepared us for this. This is a can of black spray paint defacing a memorial in white marble. Who let this in our prayer book? And hadn't we better get it out? A lot of people think so. In edition after edition of prayer books, hymnbooks, and worship books that are based on the Psalms, we find this stanza excised. These psalmectomies are well intentioned, no doubt, but wrongheaded all the same.

They are wrongheaded because our hate needs to be prayed, not suppressed. Hate is our emotional link with the spirituality of evil. It is the volcanic eruption of outrage when the holiness of being, ours or another's, has been violated. It is also the ugliest and most dangerous of our emotions, the hair trigger on a loaded gun. Embarrassed by the ugliness and fearful of the murderous, we commonly neither admit or pray our hate; we deny it and suppress it. But if it is not admitted it can quickly and easily metamorphose into the evil that provokes it; and if it is not prayed we have lost an essential insight and energy in doing battle with evil.

Dishonesty in prayer is already rampant enough without an assist from bleeding heart editors. The Hebrew editors who selected the psalms for our praying were a tougher breed; they included the third stanza of Psalm 137 deliberately and with

good reason: the life of prayer carries us into difficult country, a country in which we become aware that evil is far more extensive than anything we ever guessed, where malignity has worked itself perversely and deeply into the world's ways. As Kant said, "Evil is radical." We didn't know things were this bad. Neither our minds or our emotions are prepared to deal with this. We thrash about. We sputter in outrage. We curse the so recently identified enemy. We demand vengeance.

We have been brought up, most of us, interpreting what is wrong in the world on a grid of moralism. Moralism trains us in making cool, detached judgments. Deep down, the moralist suspects that there are no, or at least not very many, real victims. People get what is coming to them. In the long run people reap what they sow. The rape victim, the unemployed, the emotionally ill, the prisoner, the refugee—if we were privy to all the details we would see that, in fact, "they asked for it."

The Psalms will have none of this. The Psalms assume a moral structure to life, but their main work is not to train us in judgmental moralism but to grapple with evil. Their praying insights have identified an enemy and they respond in outrage. They hate what they see. On behalf of all the dispossessed, the mocked, the dehumanized of the earth they pour into the ears of God their sightings of the enemy, not "siphoning off hate, but channeling it in effective ways, in covenantal shapes."²

This hate arises in a context of holiness: meditating on the holy word of God, expecting the holy messiah of God. Before we prayed we would sit peacefully for two or three hours reading about suffering and cruelty as if we were reading about long-extinct dinosaurs, a knowledgeable but detached acquaintance. But immersed by prayer in this holiness, we see clearly what we never saw before, the utter and terrible sacrilege of enemies who violate a good creation, who brutalize women and men who are made, every one them in the image of God. There is an enormous amount of suffering epidemic in the world be-

cause of evil people. The rape and pillage are so well concealed in polite language and courteous conventions that some people can go years without seeing it. And we ourselves did not see it. But now we see it. And we hate it. We are ejected from our cushioned private religion into solidarity with "the Silent Servants of the Used, Abused and Utterly Screwed up."³

Just as hurt is the usual human experience that brings us to our knees praying for help, provoking the realization that we need God, so hate is frequently the human experience that brings us to our feet praying for justice, catalyzing our concern for the terrible violations against life all around us. Hate is often the first sign that we care. If we are far gone in complacency, it is often the only emotion with enough velocity to penetrate our protective sumgness and draw red blood. That does not mean that prayer legitimizes hate—it uses it. "Surely the wrath of men shall praise thee" (Psalm 76:10). Neither is hurt good, but it wakes us to our need for help. Human hurt is not a very promising first step to the accomplishment of wholeness; human hate is not a very promising first step to the establishment of righteousness. Nevertheless, when prayed, they are steps, first steps into the presence of God where we learn that he has ways of dealing with what we bring him that are both other and better than what we had in mind. But until we are in prayer, we are not teachable. It is better to pray badly than not to pray at all. A ship that is dead in the water can't be steered.

We want to be at our best before God. Prayer, we think, means presenting ourselves before God so that he will be pleased with us. We put on our Sunday best in our prayers. Psalm 137 is well on the way of doing just what we expect, bringing out the best in us when, without warning, this fissure opens up—a dark crevasse of hate—and brings out the worst.

It is easy to be honest before God with our hallelujahs; it is somewhat more difficult to be honest in our hurts; it is nearly

impossible to be honest before God in the dark emotions of our hate. So we commonly suppress our negative emotions (unless, neurotically, we advertise them). Or, when we do express them, we do it far from the presence, or what we think is the presence, of God, ashamed or embarrassed to be seen in these curse-stained bib overalls. But when we pray the psalms, these classic prayers of God's people, we find that will not do. We must pray who we actually are, not who we think we should be. In prayer, all is not sweetness and light. The way of prayer is not to cover our unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable, but expose them so that they can be enlisted in the work of the kingdom. "It is an act of profound faith to entrust one's most precious hatreds to God, knowing they will be taken seriously."⁴ Hate, prayed, takes our lives to bedrock where the foundations of justice are being laid.

The Angry Psalmists

Psalm 137 is the most celebrated outbreak of hate in the Psalms (and the most tampered with) but by no means an exception. There is hardly a page of the Psalms that isn't left smoking by a pungent curse.

Break thou the arm of the wicked and evildoer. (10:15)
 On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and brimstone. (11:16)
 May their belly be filled with what thou hast stored up for them. (17:14)
 You will aim at their faces with your bows. (21:121)
 God will scatter the bones of the ungodly (53:5)
 O God, break the teeth in their mouths. (58:6)
 Let them be blotted out of the book of the living. (69:28)
 Terrify them with thy hurricane! (83:15)
 He clothed himself with cursing as his coat, may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones! (109:18)
 He will execute judgment among the nations, filling them with corpses. (110:6)

O that thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God. . . I hate them with perfect hatred. (139:22)

The psalmists are angry people. In the presence of God they have realized that the world is not a benign place where everyone is doing their best to get along with the others and that if we all just try a little harder things are going to turn out all right. Their prayers have brought them to an awareness in their souls and in society of the prophesied consequences of the "enmity between you [Satan] and the woman" (Gen. 3:15).

We are easily duped by evil. Evil almost never looks like an enemy in its presenting forms. There was nothing in the wilderness temptations of Jesus to indicate that anything evil was involved—provide bread for hunger, furnish a miracle to encourage belief, acquire power that could be used to establish a just world society. But Jesus had been in prayer for forty days and nights and saw through the polite and plausible offers. His prayers had given him discernment. He identified the options as enemies. When he emerged from the wilderness it was not to negotiate in sweet reasonableness but to do battle: "I have come to cast fire on the earth" (Luke 12:49).

The last book of the bible, the Revelation to St. John, is frequently indicted for its violent language and vindictive spirit against the wicked. But St. John learned it all in the school of the Psalms, and from Jesus who was also, as the mountain people say, a good cusser. Jesus called Peter the very devil, the Pharisees vipers on their way to hell, and shouted down woes on the heads of those who used religion as a way to make themselves comfortable at the terrible cost of oppressing the weak and exploiting the poor (Matt. 16:23, Matthew 23). As the end approached Jesus took the cruelest verb in Psalm 137 and used it against Babylon, alias Jerusalem, as the enemies of God prepared to murder the messiah of God.⁵

Love Your Enemies

The last word on the enemies is with Jesus, who captured the Psalms: [6](#) “Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you.” But loving enemies presupposes that we know that they are there, whether many or few, and have begun to identify them. Enemies, especially for those who live by faith, are a fact of life. If we don’t know we have them or who they are, we live in a dangerous naïveté, unguarded from the “pestilence that stalks in darkness” and “the destruction that wastes at noonday,” witless when we pray “deliver us from evil.”

Our hate is used by God to bring the enemies of life and sal-

vation to notice, and then involve us in active compassion for the victims. Once involved we find that while hate provides the necessary spark for ignition, it is the wrong fuel for the engines of judgment; only love is adequate to sustain these passions.

But we must not imagine that loving and praying for our enemies in love is a strategy that will turn them into good friends. Love is the last thing that our enemies want from us and often acts as a goad to redoubled fury. Love requires vulnerability, forgiveness, and response; the enemies want power and control and dominion. The enemies that Jesus loved and prayed for killed him.