

## PSALLO

### Psalm 83:1–18

In the metrical translation you have before you, we have attempted to provide a translation that lends itself to singing, while remaining faithful to the original Hebrew. As with all translations, especially in the Metrical Psalms, some decisions are made for the sake of readability, meter, and style. In verse two, we have rendered a word often translated as “tumult” as “threatening noise” as this word (המנה) is sometimes used for the roar of waves, or like the growl or bark of a dog. In verse five we have chosen to bring forth the inner animus of the “heart” of God’s enemies (Hebrew לֵב) which is united against the LORD. Also literally, these who in heart are united against the LORD have made a “covenant” (Hebrew בְּרִית) where the Authorized Version (A.V.) reads “confederate.” Further, where the A.V. reads that these enemies have “holpen” the children of Lot, we have rendered this as “strength to Lot’s sons they do give.” Here, the Hebrew literally reads, “They have been an arm to the sons of Lot.” In verse thirteen, where the A.V. reads, “O my God, make them like a wheel,” we have looked more at the context, and our own current understanding of the word “wheel.” In his prayer the Psalmist expresses that the Lord would scatter these enemies as stubble, and as a weed that is blown along the ground, rolling like a wheel, similar to our western “tumbleweed,” or Russian Thistle<sup>1</sup> (Heb. גִּלְגֵּל). In our translation, we have rendered this substantive as “the rolling, tumbling weed.” It is our hope that this metrical translation will be of use to the interested worshipper.

Psalm 83 is gathered with other Psalms called “imprecatory,” where the Psalmist, using the imperative or jussive form of the verb, calls upon the Lord to rain down curses, destruction, wrath and indignation, desolation, and many other such terms (Ps. 109:17-18; 5:10; 69:24, 25). While the listing of the imprecatory Psalms might vary between scholars, it is clear that these Psalms make up a considerable portion of the inspired Psalter.<sup>2</sup> Further, beyond formal imprecations, where the Psalmist uses the imperative verb to call down curses upon God’s enemies, there are other descriptions of judgment in many other Psalms that await the wicked, that are written for the comfort and benefit of the people of God. This portion of the Psalter has given rise to some difficulty for Christians, as some have thought this kind of sentiment sub-Christian. In

his famous *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and Apply’d to the Christian State and Worship*,<sup>3</sup> Isaac Watts states,

“I come therefore to the third I proposed, and that is to explain my own Design; which in short is this: (viz.) *To accommodate the Book of Psalms to Christian Worship*; And in order to this ‘tis necessary to divest *David* and *Asaph* &c. of every other character but that of a *Psalmist* and a *Saint*, and to *make them always speak the common sense and Language of a Christian*”... “Where the Psalmist uses sharp invectives against his personal enemies, I have endeavored to turn the Edge of them against our spiritual adversaries, *Sin, Satan, and Temptation*” ... “In all places I have kept my grand Design in view, and that is *to teach my Author to speak like a Christian*.” ... “Why must I joyn with *David* in his Legal or Prophetic Language to curse my Enemies, when my Saviour in his Sermons has taught me to love and bless them?”<sup>4</sup>

#### IMPRECATORY PSALMS

Leaving the dubious theological commitments of Mr. Watts for another time,<sup>5</sup> let us say here that while many may not be so bold as Mr. Watts is in these statements, truly many in the church have wondered at or even drawn back from this portion of the inspired Word as too bold, too direct, vindictive, or otherwise unfit for Christian, New Testament worship.<sup>6</sup> For our part, we believe it a dangerous statement to say, as Mr. Watts has above, that David, Asaph, and the rest of the inspired authors of the Psalter, being borne along by the Holy Ghost (2 Pet. 1:19-21), ought or need to be “divested” of anything. In addition, it is an error to speak of those inspired authors, invested with the Spirit of inspiration, as importing any of their own personal animus into their utterances. They inveighed against the enemies of God, and if there was any personal animus at all, it was due to this characterization. It

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1. See Isaiah 17:13

2. Lists include Psalm 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 17, 25, 28, 31, 35, 40, 54, 55, 56, 58, 59, 68, 69, 70, 71, 74, 79, 82, 83, 94, 104, 109, 129, 137, 140, 143, and 144.

3. Isaac Watts, *Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and Apply’d to the Christian State and Worship* (London: J. Clark and R. Cruttendin, 1719).

4. Watts, pp. xvi, xvii, xx.

5. See *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol. LX, ed Sidney Lee (Macmillan, New York, 1899), Watson-Whewell, pp. 67-71

6. While many Psalms are retained in Christian worship, the imprecatory Psalms are often sidelined for these reasons.

# Psalm 83:1–18

A Song or Psalm of Asaph.

Al-Damiy-Lach

Todd L. Ruddell

<sup>1</sup>O God let not qui - et per - tain un - to Thee;  
<sup>3</sup>They a - gainst Thy peo - ple, cun - ning in - trigues lay,  
<sup>5</sup>For with heart to - geth - er, they de - lib - er - ate.  
 Am - a - lek, Phi - lis - tia, they in Tyre who live,  
<sup>10</sup>Spoil'd they were at En - dor, as dung on the ground,  
<sup>13</sup>O My God make them like th' roll - ing tum - bling weed  
<sup>16</sup>With shame fill their fac - es, Thy Name to seek LORD,

Do not be com - pla - cent; God not si - lent, be!  
 Ev'n 'gainst Thy shel - ter'd ones, plot to - geth - er they.  
*Pur - pose - ful* a - gainst Thee, they a cov - 'nant make.  
<sup>8</sup>As - shur joins them; strength to Lot's sons they do give.  
<sup>11</sup>As Or - eb and Ze - eb, their nobles let be found.  
 As the stub - ble that doth fly be - fore the wind,  
<sup>17</sup>Per - plex'd, fright - ed ev - er, con-founded and de - stroyed.

<sup>2</sup>For be - hold thine en - 'mies, threat - 'ning noise do make.  
<sup>4</sup>They said, Come and let us, lay their na - tion waste,  
<sup>6</sup>E - dom's tab - er - nac - les, and the Ish - m'el - ites,  
<sup>9</sup>As Thou did to Mid - ian, to them let be done,  
 Ze - ba and Zal - mun - na, who with their chiefs all,  
<sup>14</sup>As fire that burns the wood like flames the hills scorch,  
<sup>18</sup>Let them know that on - ly, Thou JE - HO - VAH art,

They the head have rais - ed, those that do Thee hate.  
 That the name of Is - r'el's not re - mem - ber'd hence.  
 Mo - ab and Ha - gar's line, <sup>7</sup>Ge - bal, Am - mo - nites,  
 To Sis - 'ra and Ja - bin, at River of Ki - shon.  
<sup>12</sup>Said God's hab - i - ta - tions, we'll seize for our - selves.  
<sup>15</sup>Chase them with thy tem - pest, make them fear Thy storm.  
 Ev'n the One Most High who's o - ver all the earth.

is grave error, and dangerous to the biblical understanding of inspiration, to say that David spoke against his “personal enemies.” Rather, David, even in his imprecations, “spoke by the Holy Ghost.”<sup>7</sup>

In response to these characterizations, we believe it is improper to pit the Old Testament against the New Testament in this way. Several lines of evidence weigh in favor of a proper use of the Psalter in Christian worship.

First, the New Testament itself ought not to be considered as so very different in sentiment when it comes to the enemies of God and His people. The imprecations of the New Testament bear this out. From the mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ, there are certainly enough imprecations against the scribes, Pharisees, hypocrites, to answer this charge. Our Lord was not hesitant to pronounce the curses of God upon His enemies, ending the twenty-third chapter of Matthew’s Gospel with, “Behold, your house is left unto you desolate” (Matt. 23:34-39). Many other such curses can be heard from the lips of our Lord. He will say to them, “ye are of your father the Devil” (John 8:41-44). While these are not proper imprecations, these and many other statements by our Lord during His earthly ministry speak to this kind of directness of speech concerning the enemies of our Lord and of His Christ. The Apostle Paul followed the example of the Lord in this. On several occasions in His writing and speech, this same kind of direct speech concerning the enemies of God is recorded for us in the New Testament. Standing before the High Priest, who had commanded him to be struck contrary to the Law, the Apostle declared, “God shall smite thee, thou whited wall” (Acts 23:3). In his epistles, the inspired Apostle speaks against such men as Alexander, Hymenaeus, Philetus, and others who must be delivered to Satan (1 Cor. 5:5; 1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 2:17; 4:14). There are also general imprecations uttered by the Apostle. See 1 Corinthians 16:22, and Galatians 1:6-10—these are indeed imprecations, the Apostle calling down the anathema of God upon those who love not the Lord Jesus Christ at his coming, and those who teach any other gospel than that which was originally taught by the Apostles. In this last curse, he includes himself should he ever pervert the purity of that original gospel preaching.

Further on this, let us remember that the “sweet Psalmist of Israel” himself would not exact personal vengeance. When pursued by Saul, and provided with an extraordinary providential opportunity to slay him, his words were very clear: “And David said to Abishai, Destroy him not: for who can stretch forth his hand against the LORD’s anointed, and be guiltless? David said furthermore, As the LORD liveth, the LORD shall smite him; or his day shall come to die; or he shall

descend into battle, and perish. The LORD forbid that I should stretch forth mine hand against the LORD’s anointed” (1 Sam. 26:9-11, AV). It would be a mistake, as was asserted above, to believe that the Psalms were written by men of personal vengeance, with less than Christian sentiments.

The Bible also declares that it is a righteous thing when God judges the wicked, and as such it is something to which the people of God look forward—the Lord in so doing vindicates His great Name, defends and gives rest to His people, and manifests His righteous judgment, advancing His glory. The judgment of the enemies of God is something over which the people of God will rejoice at the last day, and these Psalms turn their hope to the Lord’s righteous judgments. Hear again the Apostle Paul:

We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is meet, because that your faith groweth exceedingly, and the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth; So that we ourselves glory in you in the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that ye endure: *Which is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that ye may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which ye also suffer: Seeing it is a righteous thing with God to recompense tribulation to them that trouble you; And to you who are troubled rest with us, when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, In flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power; When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day. 2 Thessalonians 1:3-10 (AV).*

Beyond these observations, let us remember that imprecatory Psalms are used in the New Testament. We saw above in Acts 1:16-26, that Peter referenced Psalm 109:9-15, applied it to Judas, and used that Psalm as the basis for the closing of the circle of apostles to the number of twelve again. The Apostle Paul will do the same in Romans 11:8-10, quoting from Psalm 69:22-23, applying that curse pronounced upon the enemies of God to the Jews of His day who rejected Christ. Note in this last instance that the curse is applied by an inspired apostle upon a group of unbelieving enemies of the gospel in his day.

The last observation on the sub-biblical sentiments advanced by Mr. Watts and others is that they are based on an unproven and false assumption, that the New Testament is so very different from the Old Testament. Space will not permit a

7. Acts 1:15-20: The imprecatory Psalm 109, was that “which the Holy Ghost spoke by the mouth of David.”

full examination of this mistake, but in brief, let us remember the following things: First, the Old Testament was the Bible of the First Century church, and served very well in the hands of the apostles as they reasoned from the scriptures of that day, the Old Testament, of the gospel and glory of Christ. That the Psalms played a very large part of that preaching and witness cannot be gainsaid, seeing that there are over 400 quotations from the Psalter in the New Testament—some of them, as we have seen, imprecations. It is certainly true that the apostles were adding their own inspired work to the inspired canon, but the Old Testament, and the Psalms themselves, were not being replaced with a new ethic, or being rendered passé by a kinder gentler revelation or religion. The writing of the apostles were to appear and be kept alongside that which God had already revealed, as complimentary to it, not in place of it. Hear the Apostle Peter in this regard: “This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds by way of remembrance: That ye may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us the apostles of the Lord and Saviour” (2 Peter 3:1–2). Here we have Peter placing the two bodies of inspired writing alongside one another, and it is there that they are to remain. Rather than the Lord intending that the “sentiment” of the Psalter was to be replaced, the Psalter is to remain as the hymnal of the church. Certainly, all Christians must receive the Psalter as (at very minimum, a part of) what they offer to the Lord in their praise. The Psalms are placed in the mouths of God’s people by the New Testament writers,<sup>8</sup> as well as the Old.<sup>9</sup> It is the opinion of this author that rather than assuming a distinction between Old Testament and New Testament sentiments, that the Psalter, as Scripture undergirding both Testaments, was intended to inform the sentiments of New Testament worship. The Psalter remains the inspired, sanctified expression of the worshipper, from one end of human affection to the other, returning to God what He has commanded to be found in the “calves of our lips.”<sup>10</sup> The Lord has preserved the Psalter as Christian praise to assist the people of God to form *biblical* sentiments. The imprecatory Psalms form an integral part of New Testament worship, as well as the balance of the Psalter. This large portion of the Psalter is not to be put aside as sub-Christian, or distasteful, but preserved precisely to help God’s people in several ways.

#### USE OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

First, the imprecatory Psalms keep the people of God on a proper “war-footing.” That is, in singing the imprecatory Psalms, we proclaim the New Testament sentiment that the people of God are an army, involved in a pitched battle against a vicious yet defeated enemy. He is described as a roaring lion, and “your enemy” (1 Peter 5:8), the Accuser of the brethren

(Rev. 12:10), Abaddon, Apollyon, the Destroyer (Rev. 9:11), The Prince of this World (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11), and many other threatening titles. We are told to take up the whole armor of God, and that we “... wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12–13). We are assured that the God of peace will bruise Satan under our feet shortly (Rom. 16:20), that the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty to the pulling down of strongholds (2 Cor. 10:1–6). The Apostle Paul charges Timothy to perform this soldier-work, this battle in and out of the church for the hearts, minds, thoughts, and souls of men, and in so doing he will “war a good warfare” (1 Tim. 1:18). The imprecatory Psalms remind us that we are not at peace with our enemy—we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and we follow Christ in His assured and victorious mission to put all enemies under His feet, the last of which is death itself (1 Cor. 15:25–26). Revelation, the nineteenth chapter, reveals in prophetic form this conquering Messiah, our Captain and Head, as He comes forth to conquer all His and our enemies, and we with Him.

And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him *was* called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he doth judge and make war. His eyes *were* as a flame of fire, and on his head *were* many crowns; and he had a name written, that no man knew, but he himself. And he *was* clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies *which were* in heaven followed him upon white horses, clothed in fine linen, white and clean. And out of his mouth goeth a sharp sword, that with it he should smite the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron: and he treadeth the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And he hath on *his* vesture and on his thigh a name written, KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS. Revelation 19:11–16 (AV).

This is the fulfillment of what we sing about in Psalm 2, 22, 72, and 110 among others. The imprecatory Psalms remind us that we are on this side of the battle, that the battle is the Lord’s, and continues in this day. If we sing these Psalms with understanding, and the Lord blesses this means, we will not be lulled to sleep and complacency by the siren songs of this world, but

8. See 1 Corinthians 14:26, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, and James 5:13.

9. 1 Chronicles 16:9, Psalm 105:2, and many other “commanding and commending examples.”

10. Hosea 14:2, Psalm 69:30–31 (A messianic Psalm found in the mouth of Christ), Hebrews 13:15, and 1 Peter 2:5–9.

will be mustered into that Church Militant, and with Christ, going forth, conquering, and to conquer. Sometimes, as Peter and Paul tell us (Acts 20:27-31; 2 Peter 2:7-22), this battle will rage within the church, other times, without. No matter where the battle rages, we must acquit ourselves as “good soldiers of Jesus Christ” (2 Tim. 2:3), and the imprecatory Psalms provide this instruction and reminder of our war-footing.

Secondly, we understand, with the inspired interpretation of these Psalms, that they are found only relatively in our mouths, but absolutely in the mouth of Christ, who knows those that are His. Christ singing with His church in that Mediatorial capacity<sup>11</sup> leads His people in praise that is perfected by His Mediation, and therefore acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. We have already seen that Psalm 109 concerns Judas Iscariot, the betrayer of Christ, and this Psalm forms an interpretive key to many others, where Christ identifies Himself with His people as that Persecuted One. Psalm 69:9 exclaims, “For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me.” Note prophetically, who the “me” is in that verse, and hear the inspired interpretation of that verse by the Apostle Paul, in which he ascribes those words to Christ, as a reference to the substitutionary atonement (Rom. 15:1-3). So, rather than the imprecatory Psalms being expressions of personal vengeance, or against personal enemies, these are, as one writer put it, “The War Psalms of the Prince of Peace.”<sup>12</sup> The Messianic nature of the Psalter calls us to sing along with Christ our Captain as He goes forth prosecuting His victory, as Mediator asking His Father to give Him victory over His enemies. Many scholars have counseled us to sing the Psalms with “one eye on David, and one eye on Christ” to remember that these are prophetic of Christ. Further, Christ identifies with the troubles and afflictions of His people, and so intercedes for them, and these imprecatory Psalms are glimpses of this intercessory work. Hear Andrew Bonar on Psalm 35:

In both, (Psalms 34-35—TR) too, we find *the angel of the Lord* acting as the Lord’s instrument. In the

11. See Psalm 22:25; 35:18; 69:30.

12. James E. Adams, *The War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1991).

13. Andrew A. Bonar, *Christ and His Church in the Book of Psalms* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1860), p. 119.

14. Romans 12:19; Deuteronomy 32:25—note the parity of OT and NT sentiment here.

15. Psalm 51:4; Incidentally, all mistreatment against us is “less than we deserve.” See Ezra 9:13; Psalm 103:10; Lamentations 3:22-40. Therefore *all* vengeance belongs to the Lord. Truly, there is nothing performed against us that meets with our sins. The cup of vengeance, regarding sinful human beings, is a figment of our fallen imagination. Truly only God has a right to vengeance.

former the angel acts to protect and preserve (ver. 6), because the whole song is one of the Lord’s care; but in the latter the angel acts in the way of vengeance, as an instrument in inflicting the Lord’s wrath (ver. 5, 6), because the burden of the Psalm is an awful intercession against those who hate the righteous without cause. Throughout this is an awful Psalm. Let us read it as the words of the Lord Jesus, and what do we find? We find Him praying to the Father for help, and then consenting to the doom of his relentless, impenitent foes; yea, rather pronouncing the doom with his own lips, even as when He shall say to the barren fig-tree, “Cut it down,” and to those on the left hand, “Depart.”<sup>13</sup>

Third, it is a failure of instruction that would leave the people of God to descend in the imprecatory Psalms to personal vendetta. “Vengeance is Mine! I will repay!”<sup>14</sup> declares the Lord, as all sin is first and foremost against Him.<sup>15</sup> Rather, in the imprecatory Psalms we are reminded of our sins, that the Lord has stirred up these enemies against us in His chastisement. Rather than pride and vengeance, the imprecatory Psalms, rightly used, humble the people of God to cry out to Him for deliverance from His chastisement visited upon them for their sins. Hear this cry mingled with the imprecations of Psalm 79:

O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance; thy holy temple have they defiled; they have laid Jerusalem on heaps. The dead bodies of thy servants have they given *to be* meat unto the fowls of the heaven, the flesh of thy saints unto the beasts of the earth. Their blood have they shed like water round about Jerusalem; and *there was* none to bury *them*. We are become a reproach to our neighbours, a scorn and derision to them that are round about us. How long, LORD? wilt thou be angry for ever? shall thy jealousy burn like fire? Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen that have not known thee, and upon the kingdoms that have not called upon thy name. For they have devoured Jacob, and laid waste his dwelling place. O remember not against us former iniquities: let thy tender mercies speedily prevent us: for we are brought very low. Psalm 79:1-8 (AV).

In this Psalm we see that while calling upon the Lord for relief from and judgment upon the Lord’s and his enemies, the Psalmist also recognizes that these chastisements come upon him, and Jerusalem, for her sins—that these wicked persecutors are the very hand of the Lord, His sword, against His people, in fatherly chastisement of their rebellion from Him.

After He has accomplished all He has appointed by these wicked persecutors, He will then punish them.<sup>16</sup>

Further, the people of God cry out to God for the destruction of their enemies, yet what if those whom they have in mind as their enemies are actually the elect of God, and will one day be converted to Christ Jesus? Even here, the Lord in His mediation turns that prayer to its proper ends. Hear David Dickson, commenting upon Psalm 83:8:

If any of the enemies of God's people belong to God's election, the church's prayer against them giveth way to their conversion, and seeketh no more than that the judgment should follow them, only till they acknowledge their sin, turn, and seek God: fill their faces with shame, that they may seek thy name, O Lord.<sup>17</sup>

Finally, let us remember in these days of extreme sentiment and language, the words of the Apostle in 2 Corinthians 10:3-6:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare *are* not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

That is to say, that the governments of this world have nothing to fear from the martial efforts of the Army of God, the Church of Jesus Christ. We do not want their lands, power, wealth, authority, or any other temporal thing. We are not rebels, we are not revolutionaries, we are not incendiaries, we are Christians, following our Lord Jesus Christ to His victory, putting all enemies under His feet, and subduing many of them to Himself. Our weapons are the Word of God, the preaching of the whole counsel of God, and our armory is made up of such pieces as Truth, Righteousness, the Gospel of Peace, Faith, Salvation, The Scriptures, Prayer, and as we follow Christ, singing the imprecatory Psalms. The advance of this church means the tempering and beautifying of every society and nation, that we "may live quiet and peaceable lives in all godliness and honesty (1 Tim. 2:1-8).

#### CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the imprecatory Psalms are an integral part of Christian worship, and the people of God learn, while singing with understanding (Ps. 47:7; 1 Cor. 14:14-15), the following things:

- They are in a pitched battle with a defeated, yet fierce and vicious enemy that seeks the destruction of the people of God, and these praises remind them of this, keeping them on their war-footing (Matt. 13:39; Eph. 4:27; 6:10-20; 1 Peter 5:8; Rev. 12:12).
- Their Mediator, in whose mouth these Psalms absolutely are, sings along with them, and they follow Him in His victory.
- They are persecuted for their sins because they have sinned against God, and His chastisement has come upon them through these enemies of God and His church.
- There is no proper vengeance that they can claim—all vengeance is the Lord's, and so this cannot be a personal calling down of the wrath of God upon those who have offended them—rather they call upon the Lord to magnify His own glorious holiness, righteousness, and justice.
- Finally, that their warfare is Spiritual—they follow their Captain to His victory.

16. See Isaiah 10:10-19; Psalm 17:8-15.

17. David Dickson, *A Brief Explication of the Psalms*, vol. 2 (Glasgow; Edinburgh; London: John Dow; Waugh and Innes; R. Ogle; James Darling; Richard Baynes, 1834), p. 67.