

## God Help Us

Psalm 83:1-18

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

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Amen. Please be seated. If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn to Psalm 83 as we continue to make our way through the Third Book of the Psalms. This Psalm is an imprecatory Psalm, and as we'll see later on, it's, by the way, not the only imprecatory Psalm in this Third Book of the Psalms. When we were looking at Psalm 79 together, we noted also there an imprecatory Psalm.

An imprecatory Psalm is when the Old Testament people of God prayed that God would judge and even curse His and their enemies. That is, they call down an imprecation. They pray against God's enemies and theirs as those two categories coincide. The enemies of God and His purposes, the enemies of the people of God, those who are attempting to exterminate the people of God and to occupy the land that He has given to them and to quench the promises that He has made to them, and to cut off the line that He has established in them. And these imprecations are found throughout the Psalms. There are many, many imprecatory Psalms in which the Old Testament people of God pray against their enemies. We'll talk a little bit about that tonight, but especially I want you to see three things as we work through this Psalm tonight.

I want you to see how this Psalm models to us the believer's cry for help. The Psalm opens up with an importunate cry to God to hear, to answer, to help. It's lifted up when the servant of the Lord, the follower of God, the believer in God feels as if God isn't cognizant of what he's going through.

And then there's a description of this desperate situation in the Psalm. The picture is of one where the people of God are completely surrounded by their enemies that are bent on one purpose: to exterminate them, cut them off, finish them off.

And then, finally, there is this imprecatory prayer, this petition. It's almost warlike, isn't it, in the call for God to judge and to curse His and their enemies.

Those are the three parts of the Psalm I want to look at with you tonight. But before we read God's word and hear it proclaimed, let's look to Him in prayer and ask for His help and blessing.

*O Lord, we have thanked You over and over again for the Psalms. We have seen in these Psalms not only beautiful displays of who You are and what You have done, and what You are doing for Your people; not only glorious descriptions of Your character; not only descriptions of the predicament of believers in all ages that are so frighteningly close to the details of our own experiences we would have thought that You were looking over our shoulders and peering into our hearts; but You have displayed for us in Your Psalms a picture of what life with God looks like, the experiences of the people of God, and You do so again in this Psalm. Lord, we pray that all of its parts, its hard parts, its real descriptions of believers in a tight place, its cries for help—that all its parts would be used by Your Holy Spirit to make us to love You more, trust You more, follow You more, walk with You more, get more comfort in difficulty, be more faithful in all the exigencies of life. Hear our prayer, O God. Open our eyes that we might behold wonderful truth in Your word. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Let's hear the word of God.

A Song, a Psalm of Asaph.

O God, do not remain quiet;  
Do not be silent, and, O God, do not be still.  
For behold, Thine enemies make an uproar;  
And those who hate Thee have exalted themselves.  
They make shrewd plans against Thy people,  
And conspire together against Thy treasured ones.  
They have said, 'Come, and let us wipe them out as a nation;  
That the name of Israel be remembered no more.'  
For they have conspired together with one mind;  
Against Thee do they make a covenant:  
The tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites;  
Moab, and the Hagarites;  
Geba, and Ammon, and Amalek;  
Philistia with the inhabitants of Tyre;  
Assyria also has joined with them;  
They have become a help to the children of Lot. [Selah.

Deal with them as with Midian,  
As with Sisera and Jabin, at the torrent of Kishon,  
Who were destroyed at En-dor,  
Who became as dung for the ground.  
Make their nobles like Oreb and Zeeb,  
And all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna,  
Who said, "Let us possess for ourselves  
The pastures of God."

O my God, make them like the whirling dust;  
Like chaff before the wind.  
Like fire that burns the forest,  
And like a flame that sets the mountains on fire,  
So pursue them with Thy tempest,  
And terrify them with Thy storm.  
Fill their faces with dishonor,  
That they may seek Thy name, O Lord.  
Let them be ashamed and dismayed forever;  
And let them be humiliated and perish,  
That they may know that Thou alone, whose name is the Lord,  
Art the Most High over all the earth.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

How should we as Christians pray in the face of satanic opposition today? How should we as Christians pray in the face of world opposition to God, to His people? Do these kinds of Psalms have anything to teach us? Is there anything that we can learn from these imprecations of the Old Testament people of God? Some Christians have said no, these Psalms are sub-Christian. They don't have anything to teach the Christian about how we are to view the world and the persecution of God's people, the attacks of Satan—but I want to suggest otherwise.

Tonight I want you to see first the cry for help that is lifted up in this Psalm, and then the desperate situation that's described in verses 2-8, and then finally the warlike prayer in verses 9-18.

## **I. A cry for help.**

First of all, let's look at this cry for help.

“O God [verse 1], do not remain quiet; do not be silent and O God, do not be still.”

You see the struggle of the psalmist here. The psalmist is in a tight spot. It's not just one psalmist, it's the whole nation. The whole nation of God's people is in a tight spot, surrounded by their enemies, and they feel as if God is not active in this situation. He's silent. He's not telling them anything. He's not assuring them of His coming to their rescue. He's not acting on their behalf. He's still, and so the question that's in the heart of the psalmist is ‘Is God silent and still in this time for action, when I need Him most? Is He not there for me?’

And you know, the striking thing is that God tells His servant Asaph to write this

down and to put it in the hymnbook of the people of God. Now, this is stunning! Because we know that our God is not silent in our time of need. Francis Schaeffer reminded us of that in our own generation when he wrote a book called *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*. There was a whole generation in the 1960's and '70's that was asking that question: Is God silent in this time of need? And he answers biblically, no, He is there and He is not silent. He's speaking to us in His word, and He's not still in a time that calls for action. In fact, we learn from the Scriptures that our heavenly Father neither slumbers nor sleeps. He watches over Israel day and night...but the psalmist doesn't feel like it right now.

Still God says 'Asaph, write that down, put it in the hymnbook of the people of God, and have them sing it to Me.' Now, isn't that remarkable? God is innocent of this question, and still He says 'I understand how My people feel sometimes. I understand that they feel as if I'm not hearing them and I'm not speaking and I'm not answering their prayers, and I'm not coming to their rescue. So Asaph, you write that down and you have the people of God sing that to Me often.' Isn't that remarkable?

Ladies, can you imagine a serious discussion with your husband...you sit down and you say 'Honey, there's something very important I need to talk with you about. You see, over the last couple of years there have been several really crucial things that have happened in my life, and I just don't feel like you've been there for me when I needed you. You weren't there to listen; you weren't there to comfort; you weren't there to help when I needed you. You remember when my mother died, I really needed to talk with you about that and you weren't there for me. And you remember when we were having that problem with the children? I felt like I had to do that on my own. You weren't there to help me. And you remember that difficulty I was having with my best friend? I could really have used an ear and some advice, and, frankly, some comfort. And you weren't there for me. I need you to be there.'

Now, ladies, what if your husband said 'You know, that is such a good point. Let's write a poem about that, and we'll sing it every morning'? Well, after you picked yourself up off the floor you'd wonder what was going on!

And, you see, God, who is innocent of any and all of those kinds of charges, still says here 'I understand that My people think that there are times when I'm silent and I'm still when they need Me. I'm not. I'm working when they're sleeping. I'm watching when they're blind. I'm undertaking for them when they don't have the ability in and of themselves to put one foot in front of the other. I know that My people feel that way. So, Asaph, you write it down in the Book, you put it in the songbook of the people of God, and you have the people of God sing it to Me. I can take that, because I'm their God and I care. And I want them to know that I care, and I want them to know that I can take it when their hearts are rending and they need to cry out to Me because they're not sure that I'm there for them, even though I am.'

You see the kindness of God and the goodness of God, and the compassion of God, and the tender loving kindness of God towards His people? He says 'Write it down in the Book. I can take it. My people, you understand that what you're thinking of Me is not true. The question that's welling up in your heart is based upon something which, if you could see reality from real perspective—from My perspective, you'd be embarrassed that you'd even thought it. But you write it down in the Book of the people of God, and you sing it to Me, because I love you and I care for you, and I know how you feel. But I also want you to know that I'm never still, and I'm never silent, and I don't slumber and I don't sleep; and, I'm always watching over Israel. But when you feel like I'm not, you just sing it to Me, and by the end of the song you'll remember that I am not still and I am not silent, and I do not slumber and I do not sleep; and you will be comforted.'

That's how the song starts out. It's quite amazing, isn't it? We need to remember that, my friends, in our own prayers, because all of us lift up prayers that we think are hopeless, and all of us lift up prayers that we think God has turned a deaf ear to, a blind eye to. But God is always watching over His people—and not from a distance: right up next to us, in the middle of us. And that's the first thing that we need to see in this cry for help. God is not silent. He is not still. But He knows that sometimes you think He is, and He even seeks to minister to you in that.

## **II. A desperate situation.**

But there's a second thing, and it's this description of this desperate situation in verses 2-8. Here's the encirclement of God's people by their enemies. The commentators wrestle to pinpoint what circumstance this is in the history of Israel, because there is not quite anything that has happened in the history of Israel that is so dire, when all of these people that are mentioned from 2-8 gather together against Israel. And so it is likely that this is a sense of the encirclement of the people of God that they experience throughout the ages. This is an epitomizing Psalm in which all of the sense of the world opposition in the Old Testament saints is expressed: that the whole world is against them, the whole world wants to cut them off, the whole world wants to drive them out of the Beulah Land that God has given to them in Canaan. And I want you to see two things about this.

First of all, you need to understand that this is a reflection of Genesis 3:15, the serpent warring against the seed of the woman, seeking to bruise its heel. This is the story of those two seeds that begins in Genesis, flowing down through the line of Cain and the line of Seth: the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, and the seed of the serpent seeking to strike the seed of the woman and to cut it off. Why is that so significant? Because if the serpent can cut off the seed of the woman, if the serpent can break the line of Israel, if he can breach the line of the kings of Israel, he thinks he can prevent the seed of woman from coming

into this world: the Messiah, the promised One of God, the anointed One, the Savior of God's people.

You understand that this warfare against Israel on the part of the serpent, reflected in the warfare of the nations who want to cut them off around them, is not simply the animosity of competing nationalisms — which we still see on display in the Middle East today. Isn't it interesting to read about Philistia wanting to cut Israel off? You know who Philistia is — Palestine! We've been hearing a little bit about that of late. This isn't just a reflection of warring nationalisms in the Middle East; this is a reflection of Satan's desire to cut off the promised line, the promised seed, to prevent the Messiah of God from coming into this world. And so this is a spiritual warfare, it's far more than a national warfare.

But you may say 'Well, does that have anything to do with the Christian today?' Yes, it does! Read the Book of Revelation recently? You remember what those souls under the altar are praying in Revelation 6 and 7? "How long, O Lord?" How long are Your people going to be martyred, put to death, killed in the streets? When are You going to come to their rescue? They're playing the same song!

My friends, the psalmist in this dire description of the enemies of God surrounding them with hatred and desiring to cut them off is supplying you with words to cry out with for persecuted Christians around the world today. Even as we are here in the comfort of this sanctuary, countless Christians are facing persecution and martyrdom. More Christians have died the martyr's death in the twentieth century and in our lifetime than in all the centuries before combined, and it is so important that our prayers for them become a regular part of our prayers — not just one Sunday a year when we remember the persecuted church, but regularly. It's interesting — when you go read the old Puritan manuals on prayer, they always contained a part of their prayers where prayers were lifted up for the persecuted Christians around the world. That needs to be a regular part of our prayer. God is supplying for you words to pray for those persecuted Christians as they're surrounded by those who would cut them off.

And so we see this desperate situation, and we see that it's very applicable to the church. It is those descriptions in the Book of Revelation about how the great dragon seeks to consume the seed of the woman in the wilderness, a picture of Satan's warfare against the church, and because of those cries of the martyrs under the altar of God, that God would come and judge and relieve those who are laying down their lives for the faith.

### **III. A warlike prayer.**

One last thing in verses 9-18. This warlike prayer...this is an imprecation, a petition for God's divine curse on His enemies. Now, as I said, there are many

Christians who say imprecation—call it the Christian praying for curse on his and God's enemies, hers and God's enemies—that's an Old Testament thing. That's not a Christian thing, it's a sub-Christian thing.

And there are various ways that these Psalms have been handled. Some have said yes, this is sub-Christian, this is something that Old Testament saints did, God didn't approve of it, but He recorded it anyway because they did it, but in the New Testament God doesn't want us to call for judgment on our enemies, He wants us to pray for God's blessing upon them and for them to be converted, and we are to love our neighbor and not to hate our enemy. And so these are sub-Christian and not a part of our Christian experience.

Well, certainly we wouldn't argue a moment against the call to love our enemies, but remember that that particular call is rooted in fact in an Old Testament command and an Old Testament blessing. The desire for all the nations to come to know the true and living God is not a New Testament desire, that's an Old Testament desire. So our extended desire to see the nations come to a saving knowledge of God, to be converted, is actually rooted in Old Testament revelation stretching all the way back to Genesis 12:1-3 and even further.

Some say, well, these Psalms are actually simply recording the feelings of the people of God. God is not giving them His imprimatur. He's not approving; He's just allowing them to express their feelings.

But again, how does that square up with Paul's prayers against the false prophets? How does that square up against the martyrs' prayers in the Book of Revelation against those who are persecuting Christians?

No, these imprecatory Psalms have something to teach us. Let me just share with you a few quotes from some wise Christians commenting on them.

Walt Kaiser says, "These are not statements of personal vendetta. They are utterances of zeal for the kingdom of God and its glory. To be sure, the attacks which provoked these prayers were not from personal enemies; rather, they were rightfully seen as attacks against God and especially His representatives in the promised line of the Messiah. If these prayers of malediction, if these prayers of imprecation were intrinsically sinful, one would have a difficult time explaining the Lord's curse upon Capernaum, or Paul's prayer of anathema upon the false teachers or Paul's denunciation of Alexander the coppersmith, or the prayer of the martyrs who, under the altar of God, ask for vengeance from the Lord.

C.S. Lewis was correct when he wrote, "The ferocious parts of the Psalms serve as a reminder that there is in the world such a thing as wickedness, and that it is hateful to God.

And Alexander McClaren challenges his modern reader by saying, "It would do

modern tenderheartedness no harm to have a little more iron infused into its gentleness, and to lay to heart that the King of Peace must first be King of Righteousness. We must bear in mind what it means to love enemies. As William Holladay put it, 'The call to love one's enemies must be exercised within the context of the claims of justice. If an injustice has been done, then it needs to be made right.'

And these Psalms in the end are not only a call for just judgment: they are a call for God to exercise His reign against all opposition to that reign. Remember what Paul says at the end of that glorious hymn to Christ in Philippians 2, that there will be a day when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Now, the Apostle Paul is not saying that everyone is going to be converted, but he is saying that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess, willingly or unwillingly; convertedly or coercively, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess. And these imprecatory Psalms remind us of that.

These Psalms have something to say to us as Christians today as we face world opposition. Oh, yes! We remember that these are not heady prayers expressing individual vendettas against those who have let us down. No, these are things which are lifted up with regard to the coincidence of our enemies and God's — those who seek to destroy His church, those who seek to thwart His rule, these prayers are for them.

Yes, we pray for conversion. In fact, isn't it interesting? This Psalm gets "that close" to praying for the conversion of the enemies of God. Look at verse 16:

"Fill their faces with dishonor, that they may seek Thy name, O Lord."

Almost a prayer of conversion, isn't it? It goes on. Look at verse 18:

"That they may know that Thou alone, whose name is the Lord, art Most High over all the earth."

But in the end, this is not unlike, is it, the picture in Egypt and the picture in Ezekiel? The picture in Egypt, where God says that His display against Egypt is going to teach Egypt that He is the Lord, not in the sense of converting Egypt, but in the sense of Egypt having to unwillingly acknowledge that He is God and their gods are nothing.

And what is the phrase that Ezekiel repeats — what? fifty or more times in his book? That "the nations will *know* that the Lord is God." And again, Ezekiel doesn't have in view the conversion of the nations in this, necessarily, but that the nations would have to acknowledge what they don't want to acknowledge: that God is Lord. And these imprecatory Psalms remind us of that.

They do not, however, keep us from praying that even the enemies of the people of God would by grace become His friends. I remember how uplifted I was when I heard John Piper preaching at the Missions Conference at RTS just a few years ago. It was the fall of 2001. It was about a month after September 11. In the midst of his prayer before his message, he prayed the prayer that God would cause a billion Muslims to fall on their knees and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, and God and Savior, to the glory of the Father. And I remember thinking in my heart, you know, that's not what I was thinking of praying for the Muslim world.

And so there is a balance, isn't there, in Christian praying. We pray these prayers of imprecation against those who would persecute our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ in hard places around the world, who would destroy them and cut them off; yet, at the same time we long to see even the enemies of God trophies of His grace.

Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we thank You for this word. We thank You for the way You speak to us in the troubles of life, the way You're ready to hear us when we're grasping to know if we've been heard, the way You're ready in Your compassion to remind us of Your patience and of Your love. And, oh, Lord God, remind us that You are there and that You hear, and that You speak, and that You are active. Give us grace, O God, to know how to pray in the midst of this world that hates You and hates Your church. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Would you stand for God's blessing.

*Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith, through Jesus Christ our Lord, until the day break and the shadows flee away. Amen.*

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