# Cursing the Enemy

Psalm 109  
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This is the tenth anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center by radical Muslim terrorists bent on the destruction of America and what we stand for. The terrorists tried to attack three centers of American power: the financial center, as symbolized by the World Trade Center; the military center, at the Pentagon, and the political center, in a thwarted, but probably intended attack on the White House. The terrorists were remarkably successful in their aims. Ten years later, our economy is faltering, for many reasons, really, but the cost of borrowing money to pay over $1.2 trillion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan[[1]](#footnote-1) have put tremendous strain on our financial, military and political well-being. Our real unemployment rate is over 16%[[2]](#footnote-2)--26 million people are out of work, about 1 out of 6 people who want to work full-time cannot find full-time work. Our standing in the world is generally poorer than it was before the attacks.[[3]](#footnote-3) Many see us as a superpower in decline.

After those viscerally horrible images of the towers burning and people jumping to their deaths, and the long-term damage done to us as a result of the attacks, it is not surprising that many Americans were and still are tremendously upset. This is true for those who identify as Christians, as non-religious, as Jews, as Muslims, as whatever you may. When we think of the grieving families and the terrible deaths, there is something in us that wants to seek vengeance.

There is a class of psalms that are often called the imprecatory psalms. They are psalms that speak of enemies, of vengeance, of cursing. There really aren’t that many of them, and we sometimes try to skirt around them, but it seemed good to me that the anniversary of 9/11 provides a rare opportunity to listen to these ancient words with something like sympathetic ears and an understanding heart. We will look at one of these psalms today: Psalm 109, which I would like us to read together.

[Pass out Psalm 109; read round-robin first]

There is a lot of anguish in this psalm, and I think might want to ask what it would be like to read this psalm

* as a member of a family of someone killed in the World Trade Center
* as a member of the terrorist squad attacking the World Trade Center
* as the victim of a great oppression; for example, the maids portrayed in the movie, “The Help,”
* as the victim of rape or sexual abuse.

An important thing to notice about this psalm is that most modern commentators think there are actually *two* speakers in the psalm: one person speaking verses 1-5, and verse 20 on, and a group of people who hate the person speaking. In fact, our pew Bibles indicate this by adding a “They say” at the beginning of verse six. Read the psalm again, with this in mind.

[Pass out the second version of Psalm 109, and have one person read the first person account, and several others read the inner quotation]

How does this effect how you read the psalm?

One of the things I notice, besides it making the psalm a little less difficult to hear, is that there are curses that go back and forth. The group is clearly the bad guys, but the anger and distress in the narrator is great. I’m so glad that the scriptures show an honest account of the real emotions and real reactions of even our Bible heroes.

Still, I think it is probably good that we don’t include this psalm much in our reading. We have seen, in the words of Paul, “a more excellent way,” the way of love. Jesus Christ, rather than cursing, was cursed in order that we might be blessed. Jesus said we are to love even our enemies.

The epistle reading for the last week of this month is Romans 12:9-21. This is a series of commands, not to our government or to our culture especially, but to us in the church. Listen to them, and think what it says to us, as individuals and as a church, how we should behave ten years down the road since 9/11, especially as we think of those whom we call enemies.

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 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.” 20 No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. [[4]](#footnote-4)

9 *Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good*: We seek to be honest and complete lovers of men and women; we don’t pretend that people are always good or that evil doesn’t exist: we call bad things bad and good things good and strive for the good.

10 *Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.* We work hard at loving one another, and so become an example to the world.

13 *Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.* We share with both those inside our circles and outside our circles. We welcome weird people; that is, people different from us.

14 *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.* We do *not* pray Psalm 109 against people we consider our enemies; rather we say words of blessing about them.

15 *Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.* We face emotions honestly, and stay “in the moment” of joy or sorrow.

16 *Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.* We hope to live a “lowly” life, justly; partly because this means we are less likely to be a curse to others or to oppress others.

17 *Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 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.” 20 No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*. If there is any “cursing” that needs doing, any vengeance that needs taking, we leave this to God to undertake. We trust God to know how to do the right thing--and hope for his mercy for us! We do not feed a vicious cycle of evil, but hope, by doing the good and honorable thing, to overcome the bad by the good.

This isn’t the first time that “Christendom” has been under threat from Muslims. In the 16th century, the Muslim Ottoman Empire threatened Europe from its base in Turkey. Some of the early Anabaptists commented on them. One of them, Michael Sattler, wrote:

If the Turks should come, we ought not to resist them. For it is written (Mt. 5:21) Thou shalt not kill. We must not defend ourselves against the Turks and others of our persecutors, but are to beseech God with earnest prayer to repel and resist them.

And so this was the consistent witness of the peaceful Anabaptist—it was never the right thing to do to “take up the sword.” Interestingly, Sattler even went further:

But that I said that, if warring were right, I would rather take the field against so-called Christians who persecute, capture, and kill pious Christians than against the Turks was for the following reason. The Turk is a true Turk, knows nothing of the Christian faith, and is a Turk after the flesh. But you who would be Christians and who make your boast of Christ persecute the pious witnesses of Christ and are Turks after the spirit!

His point was not that we should take up the cause of violent Islamists, but that we, as the church, must resist every attempt to declare the government a “Christian” one, since it is violently opposed to true followers.

So, as we pray this morning, let us pray for blessings for those who attacked the United States, and through the week consider what it means to love our enemies in the way Jesus and Paul show us.

1. “Cost of War,” http://costofwar.com/en/. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Alternative measures of labor underutilization,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t15.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “From Hyperpower to Declining Power: Changing Global Perceptions of the U.S. in the Post-Sept. 11 Era,” Richard Wike, Associate Director, Pew Global Attitudes Project

   September 7, 2011 http://pewglobal.org/2011/09/07/from-hyperpower-to-declining-power/ [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Ro 12:9–21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)