

## Reading Psalms with Survivors of Abuse

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### I. INTRODUCTION

In conversation after conversation with survivors of abuse, I have heard the same set of Scriptures come up when they share how they were counseled regarding their experiences. Matthew 18:15–17 seems to be a favorite of many people in power, who often will use these verses to silence survivors. Other passages that call for forgiveness also frequently come up. Yet in discussing abuse, we can quickly dispense with Matthew 18, as its parameters are tight and fairly straightforward.<sup>1</sup> Passages calling for forgiveness are another matter, for forgiveness is an important and necessary component of the Christian life. However, before moving to passages that call for believers to issue forgiveness—which is good and right and appropriate—it may be more helpful first to go to another set of Scriptures, namely the imprecatory psalms, to help trauma survivors grapple with the pain they have endured.<sup>2</sup>

Here I will argue that imprecatory psalms—or better named, justice psalms—offer trauma survivors a model by which to engage with God

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<sup>1</sup>Essentially, this passage applies in cases where sin was unintentional or unknown (that is, the offender does not know he or she has sinned, thus the need for the offended to go to the offender to make it known), done privately, and is not criminal. Further, in cases where Matthew 18 applies, there is an assumption of *guilt*, not innocence. For further discussion, see Russell L. Meek, “How the Misuse of Matthew 18 Bullies Abuse Survivors into Silence,” *Red Letter Christians*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.redletterchristians.org/how-the-misuse-of-matthew-18-bullies-abuse-survivors-into-silence/>.

<sup>2</sup>For an overview of interpretive issues in imprecatory psalms, see Daniel Simango and P. Paul Krüger, “An Overview of the Study of Imprecatory Psalms: Reformed and Evangelical Approaches to the Interpretation of Imprecatory Psalms,” *Old Testament Essays* 29, no. 3 (2016), 581–600.

after experiencing trauma, along with the corollary to this position—that the imprecatory psalms offer Christians a way to enter into the suffering of those around us. The first section examines Jesus’ use of psalms to demonstrate that he appropriated these passages to give voice to the suffering he endured and the lament that resulted from that suffering. Based on Jesus’ use of these psalms and his model for believers who suffer today, I will offer an example of how to utilize an imprecatory psalm in the contemporary context, followed by a discussion of how reading and appropriating imprecatory psalms in this way can allow abuse survivors to (re)claim a scriptural tradition that may have been lost to them through experiencing trauma.

## II. *MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?* JESUS’ APPROPRIATION OF THE PSALMS

After his resurrection but before his ascension, Jesus walked on the Emmaus Road with a couple of his disciples. He told them that “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled,” and then he “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44–45). Thus Jesus established the primary Christian hermeneutic for understanding the Old Testament—we must view it through the lens of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Messiah of Israel, Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> The question, then, is whether Christians today—who are decidedly not Christ himself—can read the book of Psalms in a similar way by appropriating its language to their own experiences of suffering. First, let us look at a few passages in which Jesus uses Psalms to voice his thoughts and feelings.

Hanging on that old rugged cross, Jesus chose an ancient poem to articulate his feelings of despondency and despair: “‘*Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?*’ that is, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46). The phrase comes from Psalm 22, first uttered by David, according to the psalm’s superscription. In its original context, David is lamenting the perceived absence of his God, who is “so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning.” David cries “by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest” (Ps 22:1–2). The psalm goes on in gut-wrenching language as David gives voice to similar feelings Jesus would later experience. Luke records Jesus’ quotation of Psalm 22, but he adds another Scripture, this one from Psalm 31:6: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” (Luke 23:46 ESV). Here, in Jesus’ hour of

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<sup>3</sup>For a discussion of reading the Old Testament through the Christ lens, see, e.g., Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018); Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching Christ in All of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1992); Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

greatest need, he turns to Israel's collection of songs and poetry to see him through.

The duration of his agonizing death is not the only time that Jesus looked to the book of Psalms to express his thoughts and emotions. For example, in Matthew 22:44 Jesus pointed to Psalm 110:1 in his discussion with the Pharisees about the Christ's identity. In the previous chapter, Jesus cited Psalm 118:22 ("The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone" ESV) as an explanation for his parable about the tenants. The very one who was rejected—Christ himself—is the only hope of humanity, Pharisees included. And in John 13, Jesus quoted Psalm 41:9 to explain why he must break bread with Judas, the one who would soon betray him.

Apart from these passages in which Jesus utilized the book of Psalms, there are several other places where the Gospel writers looked to Psalms as prophecies that Jesus fulfilled (e.g., Matt 21:9; Luke 13:35; John 2:17). However, it is beyond the scope of the present discussion to engage the messianic nature of the Psalms and Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy. The issue at hand is Jesus' use of psalmic material to give expression to his suffering and lamentation.

So returning to Jesus' use of Psalm 22 while on the cross, Maré argues that "Jesus actualized the words of Psalm 22 in the midst of the horror of the cross to his own suffering and in that He has identified Himself with every person who experiences pain and suffering."<sup>4</sup> In Maré's view, Jesus is not fulfilling prophecy from Psalm 22 on the cross, but rather he is modeling what it looks like to express the pain and anguish he experienced on the cross through the voice of the psalmist. In this way, Jesus stands as a model for all who would later suffer. While Maré is incorrect that this is an either/or situation—either Psalm 22 is a messianic text *or* Jesus is modeling suffering—he is correct that in praying this particular psalm, Jesus offers his followers an important model for dealing with suffering. Namely, we can, like Jesus, look to the book of Psalms to give voice to the suffering and lamentation we face.

There are limits to what Christians today can claim for ourselves, and I suspect this is at the heart of Maré's argument. If Psalm 22 is *only* a messianic text, then it would be inappropriate for believers to apply it to themselves, as there is only one Christ. Thus, it would not do to take a passage like Psalm 118:22, which Jesus cites in Matthew 21:42, and apply it to ourselves. There is only one rejected stone that became the cornerstone, and that is Christ. Likewise, when Jesus is arguing with the Pharisees over who the Christ is, he uses Psalm 110:1 to trap them in a riddle. "If then David calls him Lord," Jesus asks, "how is he now his son?" These two passages *prima facie* apply only to Christ.

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<sup>4</sup>L. P. Maré, "Psalm 22: To Pray Like Jesus Prayed," *Old Testament Essays* 17, no. 3 (2004), 443.

These messianic prophecies differ from Christ's prayers on the cross that utilized psalms. First, while Jesus quotes two different psalms, both of them lack the common fulfillment formula (e.g., "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" [Matt 1:22 ESV]; ". . . the Scripture will be fulfilled" [John 13:18 ESV]). Thus, while the psalms he quoted may still be considered messianic psalms, they lack the immediate check that one would receive from appropriating, for example, Psalm 41:9 to oneself: "Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me" (ESV). Believers today may find themselves in just such a situation, but this Scripture was not written about us.

Second, in following Christ in appropriating psalms to our lives, we are not saying that those psalms were written about us. In the case of fulfilling Scripture, the New Testament writers typically tell us when they think Christ has fulfilled one Scripture or another. This fulfillment of Scripture, though, does not mean that Christ cannot also use Scripture to voice his very real and very human feelings in the midst of suffering. This is precisely what he does on the cross when he asks why God has forsaken him and when he commits himself into the Father's hands. It is one thing to fulfill Scripture; it is another to appropriate Scripture to one's current situation. Christ does both, while Christians can only do the one.

Returning to Psalm 41:9, say that you find yourself in a situation in which a close friend has betrayed you. It is one thing to say that the betrayal was foreordained from the beginning of time such that ancient Scripture would be fulfilled. That is what John did in chapter 13. It is an altogether different thing to be betrayed and then to find comfort in Scripture by knowing that other faithful people before you—including Christ himself—also suffered betrayal by close friends. You can even use the words of the psalms to give voice to your pain and frustration, but to say it was written about you *specifically* is to go too far. Simply stated, the Psalms provide models for Christians to pray—just as they did for Christ—but they are not prophecies *of* us as they were for Christ.

### III. IMPRECATIONS AND THE LOVE COMMAND

Having seen that Jesus uttered prayers from the book of Psalms and then differentiated between Christ and all other people, we now turn to what it may look like to read and pray the Psalms for ourselves. This is not typically a problem for the passages that depict worship and praise of God, such as the Hallel Psalms, or for passages that model repentance, such as David's penitence in Psalm 51, or passages that depict our dependence upon God for all things, such as Psalm 23. Imprecatory psalms, though, are not as quickly adopted as models to follow. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus instructed us this way:

But I say to you who listen: Love your enemies, do what is good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If anyone hits you on the cheek, offer the other also. And if anyone takes away your coat, don't hold back your shirt either. Give to everyone who asks you, and from someone who takes your things, don't ask for them back. Just as you want others to do for you, do the same for them. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do what is good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do what is good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High. For he is gracious to the ungrateful and evil. Be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful. (Luke 6:27–36; CSB)

Such an ethic of love and forgiveness seems at odds with some of what we read elsewhere in Psalms:

Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy is the one who pays you back  
what you have done to us.  
Happy is he who takes your little ones and  
dashes them against the rocks. (Ps 137:8–9; CSB)

God, knock the teeth out of their mouths;  
Lord, tear out the young lions' fangs.  
May they vanish like water that flows by;  
may they aim their blunted arrows.  
Like a slug that moves along in slime,  
like a woman's miscarried child,  
may they not see the sun. (Ps 58:6–8; CSB)

Let their table set before them be a snare,  
and let it be a trap for their allies.  
Let their eyes grow too dim to see,  
and let their hips continually quake.  
Pour out your rage on them,  
and let your burning anger overtake them.  
Make their fortification desolate;  
may no one live in their tents. (Ps 69:22–25; CSB)

Reading these psalms just after Jesus' sermon urging love for enemies is jolting. This is why it is no surprise that the primary objection to uttering the darker prayers in the book of Psalms is the New Testament ethic of

love for enemy.<sup>5</sup> However, Paul tells us that *all* Scripture is breathed out by God, and right there in the Bible, we find passages that seem to contradict Jesus' love command.

One way to reconcile these two portions of Scripture—loving enemies on the one hand and cursing them on the other—is to argue that the Old Testament no longer applies to Christians in the age of grace. While this argument may not be popular in scholarly literature, it is common among the average Christian reader. This approach is similar to that of Marcion in his *Antitheses*, where he pitted the “Creator God” of the Old Testament against the “Good God” of the New Testament. The former, in his view, was to be jettisoned in favor of the latter. The Marcionite approach has certain benefits; supreme among them is the ability to slough off passages in the Old Testament that offend our sensibilities and paint a picture of God that differs from the New Testament.

However, this bifurcation of Testaments fails for a few reasons. First, Marcion was condemned as a heretic even in his own day. That alone should give us pause when adopting his hermeneutical methods. Of course, the modern-day “that’s the Old Testament” trope does not appeal overtly to Marcion for its defense. Related to this, second, is that Paul instructs his readers—and us today—that all of Scripture is divinely inspired. Jesus himself points to the Old Testament and explains its Christological significance to the disciples on the Emmaus Road. Third, and most significant for our purposes here, is that Jesus both commanded love for our enemies *and* engaged in imprecation himself.<sup>6</sup>

For example, when sending out the Twelve in Matthew 10, he concludes his instructions to them with a strong note of imprecation on those who refuse to heed the gospel message.<sup>7</sup> “If anyone does not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly I tell you, it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town” (Matt 10:14–15; CSB). Jesus’ disciples are to deliver both the good news of reconciliation with God *and* are to enact a sign of judgment upon those who refuse to welcome them or listen to that message. This passage puts in stark contrast what Paul also writes to the Corinthians, namely that

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<sup>5</sup>See John Day’s discussion of the “Unsatisfactory Solutions” to the “problem” of imprecatory psalms in John Day, *Crying for Justice: What the Psalms Teach Us About Mercy and Vengeance in an Age of Terrorism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2005), 21–35.

<sup>6</sup>I would like to thank my student, Rebekah White, for her thoughtful and engaging dialogue with me regarding Jesus’ imprecations in the Gospels. The following discussion reflects her insights in our class on Psalms at Moody Theological Seminary in the spring of 2020.

<sup>7</sup>For discussion of the term translated “welcome” in the CSB, along with its implications for understanding acceptance/rejection of God’s kingdom, see Joseph Nalpathilchira, “‘He Who Receives You’: The Meaning of the Verb *dechomai* in Matthew 10,” *Bible Bhashyam* 41(2015), 167–85.

“To some we are an aroma of death leading to death, but to others, an aroma of life leading to life” (2 Cor 2:16).<sup>8</sup> The gospel itself contains within it a sharp note of condemnation for those who reject it. This creates the same sort of tension, it seems, that exists when trying to reconcile Jesus’ love command with the psalms of imprecation.

Matthew 18:6 is another, perhaps more fitting, example of Jesus’ use of imprecation in his ministry. After welcoming children to him, Jesus turns to his listeners and states,

But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to fall away—it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses. For offenses will inevitably come, but woe to that person by whom the offense comes (Matt 18:6–7; CSB).

Jesus goes on to describe the seriousness of sin by urging the one who might sin to instead cut off his hand or gouge out his eye in order to avoid sin. The element of judgment is again embedded within Jesus’ offer for reconciliation with God—it is better to gouge out an eye oneself than to face the sort of destruction Jesus envisions for the one who would cause “one of these little ones who believe in me to fall away.”

Finally, in addition to the many heated exchanges between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day, there is the famous passage in which he overturns the tables of the moneychangers within the temple complex, which is included in all four Gospel narratives (Mark 11:15–19; Matt 21:12–13; Luke 19:45–46; John 2:13–17). In John’s Gospel this episode is cited as a fulfillment of a line from Psalm 69, itself an imprecatory psalm: “zeal for your house has consumed me” (Ps 69:9 / John 2:17). This at the least indicates that John did not see this particular passage as incongruous with Jesus’ broader ministry and calls to love one another. In addition, it indicates, as noted above, that the first interpreters of Jesus’ ministry saw continuity between the Psalms—imprecations among them—and Jesus Christ. In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus cites two Old Testament prophets, Isaiah and Jeremiah, in his condemnation of the moneychangers for turning the temple complex into a place where the poor are exploited instead of given ready access to their God.<sup>9</sup> Both the temple-cleansing event and Jesus’ concern that children are not led astray

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<sup>8</sup>For discussion of the cultural and historical context of Paul’s imagery, see the commentaries on 2 Corinthians. In addition, see the detailed discussion in Adrian Wypaldo, “Paulus im Triumphzug Christi (2 Kor 2,14): Überlegungen zum Selbstverständnis des Apostels Paulus vor dem Hintergrund antiker Triumphzugspraxis,” *Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt* 38 (2013), 147–87.

<sup>9</sup>There are many interpretations as to the significance of this event in the scholarly literature; however, constraints of space and focus prohibit me from engaging the event more fully; for our purposes, what matters is that Jesus took aggressive action against those who were causing harm to others.

indicate that the command to love our enemies—which Jesus no doubt fulfilled!—must include some aspect of imprecation. Therefore, the two do not stand in opposition to each other, but rather make up two sides of the one coin.

In sum, the Gospel narratives show us that Jesus, while loving his enemies to the extreme of dying on the cross for them, also did not shy away from employing language and actions that would seem to contradict the command to love them. Thus—and of course employing some circular reasoning—if Scripture is inspired, and if Jesus utilized both blessings and curses toward his enemies, then the two must not be contradictory.

*Resolving* is a bit ambitious of a goal, but I think we can at least move toward finding some way to live with the tension of Jesus' command for enemy love, his model of utilizing imprecation, and also his command for his disciples themselves to enact imprecations on those who refuse to welcome them or their gospel message. And living in that tension, I contend, will be much more beneficial for those seeking to serve survivors of abuse and for survivors of abuse themselves.

The preceding section demonstrated that these two aspects of Jesus' ministry are not mutually exclusive. The section before that argued that believers can adopt Jesus' model in praying the psalms. And now in the next section, I turn to an example of what appropriating an imprecatory psalm could look like, in all its (seemingly) contradictory glory.

#### IV. CHRISTIAN APPROPRIATION OF IMPRECATORY PSALMS

An anecdote is not data, yet Scripture was written for the purpose of God revealing himself to humans and showing us what it means to live in a relationship with him. Jesus, the Word Incarnate, experienced the full range of human emotion and relied on Scripture to guide him through his times of deepest need. Granted, I have not suffered anything close to the horrors Jesus faced, but I—like most of us—have endured suffering that stretched my faith to its extreme.

As an adolescent, my mother married a deacon in a local Southern Baptist church, a man widely respected in the church and community. He was a small-group leader, small-business owner, and successful evangelist. He was also unpredictable, violent, and unrelenting in his quest to ensure total control over everything in his home. This deacon used Scripture to bully me and my mom, and his sharp words cut deep. The church leadership, when I told them about the abuse in my home, gave me a book to read on the importance of being submissive to authority, and my youth pastor cried with me, telling me he wished there was more he could do.

I moved out before I graduated from high school and became a Christian shortly thereafter. (I had grown up in church but true faith in



Christ eluded me all those years.) I had no idea how to grapple with the abuse I had seen and experienced at the hands of my stepfather and the church leaders who enabled him. I was angry, bitter, incredibly sad, and confused. I had heard all the Scriptures I mentioned at the start of this essay; I knew I should love my enemies, forgive those who sin against me, and do my best to live at peace with everyone. None of that, though, could tame the enflamed scars across my soul.

In starts and stops, over many conversations about who God is and why he would let this go on for so many years, I shared my experiences with the director of the Baptist Collegiate Ministries at my college. He introduced me to those passages I quoted earlier—the passages that make so many of us queasy. He taught me how to appropriate these psalms, how to apply them to my life in such a way as to bring healing to my hurt. This showed me a path toward both forgiveness of my enemy and nearness to the God who suffered more than all. The following “steps” (scare quotes intentional) are laid out in an orderly fashion, but grief is not orderly, and all of the “steps” roll on top of each other. There is no logical progression, at least none that I know of, in dealing with trauma.

### 1. Expression of Feelings

Perhaps the most significant aspect of appropriating an imprecatory psalm is that it gives space for expressing feelings that are not typically thought to be “Christian.” For example, Psalm 69 states, “Let their eyes grow too dim to see, and let their hips continually quake. Pour out your rage on them, and let your burning anger overtake them.” Such sentiments certainly would get a person on a church’s prayer list, but perhaps not the one he was hoping for. As a result, most people, or at least most people I know, are hesitant to vocalize those sorts of thoughts. Yet here they are, right in the Bible, alongside psalms that we sing to our children at night.

Verses like these, in all of the discomfort they create in modern readers, have the potential to do significant therapeutic good in survivors of abuse. This good comes from modeling a way to communicate feelings like anger, rage, and frustration because of the evil done to them. They give voice to the darkest thoughts of the human heart, thoughts that call for justice and vengeance because of the real evil that humans sometimes do to one another. And not only do they show how to express emotion to God, they show that such emotion is to be expected. It is part of the full gamut of emotions with which God created humanity. The God of love and justice does not require his people to inhibit their feelings in front of him; rather, he inspired Scripture to show that it is good and right to express our full hearts to him. In sum, imprecatory psalms affirm—in a uniquely positive way—the importance and acceptability of expressing “negative” emotions to God.

Reeling from years of living in an abusive home and so many Christians who told me that such “negative” feelings had no place in a Christian’s heart, this is the perspective I dearly needed to move through the trauma I experienced. Seeing imprecatory prayers in print gave me a means to express exactly what I was feeling, and they gave me a safe outlet for those thoughts—God himself.

## 2. Trust and Forgiveness

Second, imprecatory psalms give survivors of abuse a tool that can help them trust in God’s sovereignty and justice; such trust, then, prevents people from exacting their own justice and also illuminates a path toward forgiveness. It is an excruciatingly difficult thing to entrust God with vengeance rather than seeking it through our own means, but that is precisely what these psalms call for.<sup>10</sup> These prayers do not advocate for a person to exact vengeance for herself or himself. No, they leave plenty of room for God to exact his own vengeance, and they implore God to do so. Like expressing one’s feelings to God, this allows a person also to entrust justice to God and move forward—however slowly or imperfectly—toward forgiveness.

However, please note: part of God’s vengeance may well be—and hopefully is—the use of government to bring about vengeance. One should, in every situation, report abuse to the proper authorities, for God has established government for the purpose of judging rightly, as both the Old and New Testaments indicate. Indeed, one practical way to live out imprecatory psalms is to ask the government (police, the court system, etc.) to enact justice on one’s behalf, as it is intended to do in criminal situations.

The call for God to bring justice is not at odds with either asking the government to bring justice or forgiveness of one’s abuser. They can and do coexist. Further, walking with survivors of abuse through this particular part of the process requires wisdom and care because forgiveness does not happen overnight. It often happens on a sliding scale as one’s feelings slowly coalesce with one’s theological convictions.

## 3. Recognition of Evil

Finally, imprecatory psalms recognize the reality of evil. In Christian contexts, it is easy to gloss over the enormous damage that evil does and move too quickly to forgiveness, bypassing the call for justice and the deep lament that should come first. These psalms, in contrast to a church culture that would have us believe that all Christians should be happy and

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<sup>10</sup>David Firth notes this as surrendering to God’s Wisdom. David G. Firth, “Cries of the Oppressed: Prayer and Violence in the Psalms,” in *Wrestling with the Violence of God: Soundings in the Old Testament*, ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and J. Blair Wilgus, BBRSup 10 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 75–89.

live their best life now, put words to the reality of evil. Just as their words model how to voice one's feelings to God and entrust one's protection and retribution to God, they show survivors of abuse that God does not turn a blind eye to evil in the world. Through canonized Scripture, he has named it and vocalized its devastating effects. His followers today can do the same.

#### 4. Reclaiming the Cross

For survivors whose abuse intersects with the Christian community in some way—and even for some where it does not—reclaiming Scripture can be difficult. But imprecatory psalms can be a step toward reclaiming a tradition that either they lost or was stolen from them. They can also be an introduction to the God who loves them, the God who hears their cries, the God who provided a model for expressing feelings of rage and anger, and the God who survived horrific abuse at the hands of other human beings.

No, this essay is not a bait-and-switch; I showed above that Jesus Christ embodied the Psalms uniquely and powerfully in his ministry on earth and during his final moments on the cross. He is the ultimate sufferer, the one who embraced human nature so he could experience the suffering that we endure. In his incarnation, Christ models what it looks like to endure undeserved suffering, offer forgiveness, and yet still confront the reality of evil with fierce words calling for God's justice. As Christians seek to read psalms with survivors of abuse, may we honor Christ by giving voice to the voiceless, overturning this world's power structures, and entering into the suffering of the vulnerable, just as Jesus did two thousand years ago and the psalmists did even before then. *Maranatha.*

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