

Imprecatory Prayer and the Ethic of Love: Christian Lament, Divine Justice, and Pastoral Care amid Religious Violence in Nigeria

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Abstract

The violent language of the imprecatory Psalms presents one of the enduring ethical tensions within Christian spirituality. The difficulty becomes especially acute for believers who have experienced religiously inflected violence, displacement, bereavement, abduction, and destruction of communities. This qualitative practical-theological study examines how persecuted and displaced Christians connected with Nigeria understand prayers for divine judgement and how such prayers may be reconciled with Jesus' command to love one's enemies. The study draws principally on 12 semi-structured interviews with Nigerian Christians affected by violence in Plateau, Benue, and Borno States or subsequently displaced to Ghana, together with contextual observations and pastoral material from Ghana and Cameroon. The material was interpreted through thematic and hermeneutical analysis in dialogue with imprecatory Psalms, New Testament enemy-love, African biblical interpretation, pastoral theology, and Christian ethics. Three interrelated movements emerged: **lament as moral protest, righteous anger surrendered to divine justice, and the transformation of imprecation into redemptive intercession**. The article argues that imprecatory prayer should neither be dismissed as primitive vengeance nor uncritically employed as a spiritual weapon against human opponents. Properly situated within lament and interpreted through Romans 12:19–21 and the enemy-love tradition of Jesus, such prayer may provide wounded believers with language for naming evil while transferring vengeance from the victim to God. The proposed **Lament–Justice–Intercession Framework** offers pastoral guidance for helping traumatised Christians express anger honestly, pursue justice non-violently, resist retaliatory hatred, and move—without coercion or premature forgiveness—toward prayer for transformation and peace. The study concludes that Christian love does not require silence before atrocity; it requires that the cry for justice itself be disciplined by the cruciform character of mercy.

Keywords: imprecatory prayer; Christian persecution; lament; divine justice; enemy-love; pastoral counselling

1. Introduction

There are moments when the language of ordinary prayer seems too gentle for the experience of violence.

A congregation has been attacked.

A pastor has been abducted.

A family has buried a child.

A village has been emptied.

A widow kneels to pray, but the words that rise within her are not immediately words of forgiveness. They are words closer to the Psalms:

How long, O Lord?

Rise up.

Contend with those who contend with me.

Do not let wickedness prevail.

For Christian communities affected by violent persecution, these are not merely exegetical problems. They are pastoral realities.

Nigeria provides a particularly demanding context for this discussion. Contemporary religious-freedom reporting documents continuing violence by insurgent and armed groups, including JAS/Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province, alongside attacks associated with armed actors from Fulani backgrounds. Christians have been severely affected, although Muslims and other religious communities have also suffered substantial violence. This complexity requires care: not every violent incident in Nigeria can responsibly be reduced to a single religious explanation, even where religious identity is an important dimension of particular attacks.

The pastoral question remains urgent:

How should a Christian pray when evil has become personal?

The tension appears immediately when Psalm 58:6—"*Break the teeth of the wicked, O God*"—is placed beside Matthew 5:44—"*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.*"

Psalm 109 seems to demand judgement.

Romans 12:19 declares that vengeance belongs to God.

Revelation 6 portrays martyrs asking how long divine judgement will be delayed.

Luke 23 portrays Jesus praying for His executioners.

The Christian Scriptures therefore do not offer a simplistic choice between justice and mercy. They preserve both the agonised cry of the victim and the radical demand of enemy-love.

The present study examines that tension through the experiences of African Christians whose prayers emerged from real contexts of violence. The source research combined interviews with Nigerian Christians affected by persecution and displacement with pastoral observations from

Ghana and testimonies from Cameroon, bringing lived faith into dialogue with Scripture and practical theology.

This article argues that imprecatory prayer can have a legitimate place within Christian lament **when it transfers judgement to God rather than authorising retaliation by the believer**. At the same time, imprecation requires Christological and pastoral discipline. A prayer born in pain should be heard before it is corrected, but a prayer that cultivates dehumanisation should not be spiritually romanticised.

The question, therefore, is not simply whether Christians may pray imprecatory prayers.

The more searching question is:

What must happen to the wounded heart as it prays them?

2. Imprecatory Psalms as the Language of Wounded Faith

Imprecatory Psalms contain petitions for God to judge, defeat, expose, shame, or punish enemies. Psalms 35, 58, 69, 83, 94, 109, and 137 are commonly associated with this tradition.

These texts disturb many Christian readers because their emotional intensity appears difficult to reconcile with New Testament commands concerning forgiveness and enemy-love.

Yet contemporary scholarship cautions against treating them merely as relics of primitive rage.

Van De Wiele (2021) argues that moral reasoning within the Psalms of retribution is embedded in ancient understandings of justice and appropriate consequence rather than being reducible to uncontrolled fantasy. Other scholarship has similarly argued that the Psalter's imprecatory language gives voice to otherwise suppressed cries against injustice and violence.

This observation is pastorally significant.

The Psalms do not require sufferers to lie to God.

They permit speech that polite religion may suppress.

The victim may say:

"I am angry."

"What happened was evil."

"I want justice."

"I cannot forgive yet."

"God, do something."

Such speech can remain prayer precisely because it is addressed to God rather than enacted against the enemy.

The movement is subtle but crucial.

Imprecation relinquishes personal control of vengeance by placing judgement before God.

Romans 12:19 does not tell the injured believer that injustice is unimportant. It says: *"Never avenge yourselves ... 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay,' says the Lord."* The command against personal vengeance rests upon confidence in divine justice.

The Christian victim is therefore not asked to declare evil acceptable.

The victim is asked not to become the final judge.

3. African Appropriation of Imprecatory Prayer

The African Christian reception of imprecatory Psalms deserves interpretation on its own terms.

Adamo's study of Psalm 109 in African Christianity shows that the Psalm has frequently been interpreted not merely as a curse text but as an appeal for divine protection, vindication, healing, and justice.

Similarly, Awojobi's recent study of Psalm 35 among Yoruba Indigenous Churches demonstrates the continuing importance of imprecatory Psalms within African Christian spiritual-warfare traditions, while also acknowledging the ethical difficulties created when violent biblical metaphors are directed toward human opponents.

This African interpretive setting matters.

In religious cultures where the spiritual world is experienced as immediately connected to ordinary life, prayer concerning enemies is not necessarily regarded as figurative theological language. It may be understood as an active appeal for protection against forces perceived to threaten one's life, family, livelihood, or spiritual well-being.

The pastoral problem emerges when distinctions collapse.

An oppressive structure may become indistinguishable from a particular person.

A spiritual adversary becomes a neighbour.

A metaphor of warfare becomes a wish for physical destruction.

A cry for protection becomes a prayer for revenge.

Christian counselling must therefore respect the cultural and spiritual world of the believer without approving every expression produced within it.

Cultural understanding is not moral surrender.

4. The Nigerian Context: Persecution, Violence, and Theological Complexity

Nigerian Christians have experienced severe forms of violence, including attacks upon villages and places of worship, kidnapping, displacement, and killings. Ukeachusim's (2022) theological study identifies persecution as a substantial challenge for Nigerian Christian communities and explores John 16 as a source of peace in the midst of tribulation.

Recent independent religious-freedom reporting likewise describes ongoing attacks on religious communities by JAS/Boko Haram, ISWAP, armed gangs, and other actors. USCIRF has repeatedly raised concerns about the Nigerian government's inability or slowness in preventing some attacks and protecting freedom of religion or belief.

At the same time, scholarly and pastoral integrity requires avoiding an overly simple Christian-versus-Muslim narrative.

Muslims have also been murdered, abducted, displaced, and prosecuted under religious laws. Nigeria's conflicts may involve overlapping dynamics of religion, ethnicity, land use, organised crime, political failure, insurgency, local grievance, and competition over resources. Official reporting itself notes attacks affecting Christians and Muslims and recognises that religious identity operates alongside other conflict dynamics.

This qualification does not diminish the suffering of persecuted Christians.

It prevents pastoral theology from turning one community's suffering into an indictment of another religious population as a whole.

The Christian ethic of love requires truthful naming of perpetrators without collective condemnation of millions who share an ethnic or religious identity.

5. Anger, Trauma, and the Pastoral Meaning of Prayer

Anger following violence should not automatically be interpreted as spiritual failure.

Anger may communicate:

"Something precious was violated."

"Someone should have protected us."

"This should not have happened."

"There must be accountability."

Pastoral care becomes harmful when such emotions are immediately silenced by commands to forgive.

Forgiveness that is demanded before grief and anger have been acknowledged may become another form of spiritual pressure.

The imprecatory Psalms provide an alternative pastoral movement.

They allow the injured person to take anger somewhere.

Not into retaliation.

Into prayer.

A recent philosophical treatment of Christian blame and vengeance makes an important distinction: revenge prayer may be ethically problematic as an ideal, yet in circumstances of severe trauma, bringing otherwise unmanageable retaliatory emotion into prayer may be morally preferable to acting violently upon it.

This insight should be used cautiously, but it is pastorally important.

The counsellor need not respond to a traumatised widow saying, *"God, destroy those who killed my husband,"* by immediately correcting her theology.

The first response may be:

"Tell me what happened."

"Tell me what you lost."

"Tell God what you cannot yet say to anyone else."

Emotional honesty can precede theological transformation.

6. Purpose of the Study

This study explored how Christians affected by persecution and communal violence understand imprecatory prayer and how those prayers interact with Christian commitments to justice, forgiveness, mercy, and enemy-love.

The study addressed three questions:

1. How do Christians affected by violent persecution express anger and demands for justice through prayer?

2. How do they interpret imprecatory biblical texts in relation to their experience?
3. What pastoral processes may assist believers in moving from retaliatory impulses toward justice-oriented and non-violent Christian intercession?

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

The study employed a qualitative practical-theological design integrating narrative inquiry, contextual case analysis, biblical interpretation, and pastoral theological reflection.

The approach was appropriate because the central concern was not prevalence but meaning: how believers interpret prayer, anger, divine justice, forgiveness, and love amid experiences of persecution.

The research drew broadly upon practical theological interpretation in which lived experience and theological tradition enter disciplined dialogue.

7.2 Participants and Data Sources

The principal qualitative component comprised **12 semi-structured interviews with Nigerian Christians** who had experienced violence or displacement connected to Plateau, Benue, and Borno States, including some who later resided in Ghana. Participants included pastors, widows, and Christian youth leaders.

The source study additionally incorporated observations from three Ghanaian congregations where warfare or imprecatory forms of prayer were practised and written testimonies from two Cameroonian pastors concerning prayer during violent conflict. Documentary and theological materials were also employed as interpretive resources.

7.3 Data Collection

Interviews and pastoral listening encounters explored participants' responses to violent persecution, the emotions expressed through prayer, and the tension between divine justice and Christian love.

Some pastoral listening sessions occurred in Ho, Accra, and Kumasi, where displaced persons and clergy described experiences of fear, anger, loss, forgiveness, and spiritual struggle.

Field notes recorded recurring biblical references and prayer language. The source manuscript reports informed consent for recorded interviews and the use of pseudonyms to protect participants.

7.4 Analysis

Analysis combined thematic interpretation with theological hermeneutics.

Recurring motifs included:

- anger;
- justice;
- protection;
- vengeance;
- forgiveness;
- mercy;
- lament;
- divine sovereignty; and
- hope.

These themes were read in dialogue with imprecatory Psalms, particularly Psalms 35, 69, and 109, and New Testament texts concerning enemy-love, forgiveness, and divine vengeance.

The study's analytical process deliberately moved between lived experience and Scripture rather than treating either as self-interpreting.

7.5 Ethical and Pastoral Considerations

Because participants included persons affected by violence and displacement, confidentiality, informed consent, emotional sensitivity, and pastoral support were central concerns.

The source study reports that participants were offered follow-up pastoral counselling and spiritual support where appropriate.

A publication-ready interpretation should nevertheless distinguish research from therapy. Participation in theological research should never be represented as treatment, and forgiveness should not be imposed upon traumatised participants as an expected outcome of participation.

8. Findings

Three related movements emerged from the narratives:

1. **Lament as moral protest**
2. **Righteous anger surrendered to divine justice**
3. **Imprecation transformed toward redemptive intercession**

8.1 Lament as Moral Protest

Participants frequently described imprecatory prayer not primarily as hatred but as an appeal to be seen by God.

Theologically, this distinction matters.

The person who cries, "*God, judge them,*" still believes there is a moral order.

The prayer assumes that evil should not be normalised.

It assumes that God sees.

It assumes that the victim matters.

In this sense, lament is moral protest.

The wounded believer refuses both silence and nihilism.

Research on Psalm 109 in African contexts similarly emphasises imprecation as an appeal to God to intervene for the vulnerable and oppressed rather than leaving the injured person to pursue vengeance independently.

The pastoral value of lament lies precisely here.

It gives anger theological address.

8.2 Righteous Anger and the Transfer of Vengeance

A second theme involved the distinction between anger and retaliation.

Several participants acknowledged anger openly but described prayer as a means of leaving judgement with God.

One pastoral principle emerged clearly:

anger may be morally intelligible without every action produced by anger becoming morally permissible.

Ephesians 4:26—*"Be angry and do not sin"*—recognises this distinction.

Romans 12:19–21 deepens it.

The injured Christian is not instructed to deny evil but to renounce personal vengeance.

This creates an important theological understanding of imprecatory prayer:

the believer names what deserves judgement while relinquishing the right to execute that judgement personally.

That surrender distinguishes prophetic lament from retaliatory spirituality.

8.3 From Imprecation to Intercession

The most significant pattern in some participant narratives was movement over time.

Initial prayers could contain demands for destruction.

Later prayers sometimes became petitions for restraint, repentance, conversion, accountability, or peace.

The source manuscript records participants describing a movement from prayers equivalent to *"Lord, destroy them"* toward prayers resembling *"Lord, change them."*

This movement should not be interpreted as a compulsory timetable for forgiveness.

Trauma does not mature according to theological deadlines.

Some victims may never feel emotionally reconciled with perpetrators.

Some may appropriately maintain lifelong distance.

Others may seek criminal accountability.

Christian forgiveness does not require restoration of unsafe relationships.

What the movement demonstrates is that the emotional content of prayer can change.

Imprecation need not be the final destination.

9. Three Forms of Imprecatory Prayer

The findings support a useful pastoral distinction among three forms.

9.1 Retaliatory Imprecation

Retaliatory imprecation seeks suffering primarily because the victim wants the enemy to experience pain.

Its emotional logic is:

"You hurt me; therefore I want you hurt."

This response is psychologically understandable following atrocity, but it presents serious Christian ethical difficulties when hatred becomes cultivated as a virtue.

A church should not disciple people into dehumanisation.

9.2 Justice-Oriented Imprecation

Justice-oriented imprecation asks God to stop evil, expose wrongdoing, protect victims, judge injustice, and vindicate those who have suffered.

Its prayer is:

"Lord, stop this."

"Protect the innocent."

"Bring the perpetrators to justice."

"Do not allow evil to prevail."

This form has strong affinities with biblical lament.

Imprecatory language in the Psalter often emerges precisely where normal structures of justice appear to have failed. Scholarship on the Psalms likewise recognises that imprecatory texts are closely connected with moral reasoning about wrongdoing and consequence.

9.3 Redemptive Intercession

Redemptive intercession retains the demand for justice but includes the possibility that the enemy might repent.

Its prayer may become:

"Lord, stop them."

"Expose their violence."

"Protect their victims."

"Bring them to justice."

"And transform them so that they cease doing evil."

This does not weaken justice.

It widens the horizon of prayer.

10. The Lament–Justice–Intercession Framework

The findings suggest a three-movement pastoral framework for working with imprecatory prayer.

10.1 Lament: Tell the Truth About the Wound

The first movement is permission.

The Christian counsellor invites the wounded person to speak without requiring immediate spiritual composure.

What happened?

What was lost?

What are you afraid of?

What are you angry about?

What do you want God to do?

Which prayer are you afraid to pray aloud?

The Psalms provide language for this work.

Lament refuses false peace.

10.2 Justice: Name the Evil Without Becoming the Evil

The second movement distinguishes justice from revenge.

The counsellor may ask:

What would justice look like?

Would justice mean protection?

Arrest?

Truth-telling?

Restitution?

Security?

An end to impunity?

Repentance?

The distinction is psychologically and ethically important.

Vengeance says:

"I need your suffering."

Justice says:

"This wrongdoing must stop and be answered."

The Christian ethic does not require abandoning justice.

It forbids allowing justice to become hatred's disguise.

10.3 Intercession: Return the Enemy to God

The third movement asks whether prayer can gradually hold two petitions together:

"God, stop the evil."

and

"God, redeem the evildoer."

Jesus' command to pray for persecutors does not require believers to call persecution good.

Stephen's prayer in Acts 7 does not erase his murder.

The cross does not declare Rome innocent.

Enemy-love names a deeper Christian refusal: evil will not determine the moral character of the victim.

11. Enemy-Love Is Not Passivity

One of the most dangerous pastoral misinterpretations of enemy-love is to equate it with passivity.

Matthew 5:44 does not forbid:

reporting crimes;

protecting communities;

seeking prosecution;

supporting displaced people;

documenting atrocities;

advocating for security;

resisting religious discrimination;

or demanding governmental accountability.

Love of enemies is not permission for enemies to continue harming people.

Romans 12 itself links the renunciation of personal vengeance with confidence in divine judgement.

Christian non-retaliation therefore differs sharply from political silence.

The Church can pray for an attacker's repentance while also insisting that the attacker be arrested.

Mercy and accountability are not opposites.

12. The Danger of Spiritualising Political Violence

Pastoral care must also resist interpreting every form of violence exclusively through "spiritual warfare."

Calling an attacker a demon may obscure the practical responsibilities of law, government, security, trauma services, conflict resolution, and justice systems.

Ephesians 6:12 reminds Christians that the struggle is not ultimately against "flesh and blood." That verse should make Christian discourse **less willing to demonise human beings**, not less willing to oppose evil behaviour.

The perpetrator remains human.

The victim remains human.

The counsellor's ethical responsibility is to protect the humanity of the victim without denying the humanity of the offender.

This is exceedingly difficult.

It is also central to Christian ethics.

13. Pastoral Counselling with Persecuted and Displaced Christians

Pastoral counselling should never be reduced to instructing victims to forgive.

A more responsible process begins with assessment.

Is the person safe now?

Are family members missing?

Is there continuing risk?

Are there trauma symptoms?

Depression?

Sleep disturbance?

Suicidal thoughts?

Bereavement complications?

Financial displacement?

Loss of housing?

Separation from children?

A need for medical care?

Legal assistance?

Christian counselling should integrate spiritual care with appropriate referral.

Prayer cannot substitute for trauma treatment.

Likewise, psychological care need not exclude prayer where the client desires it.

The counsellor may work with an imprecatory prayer therapeutically by asking:

"When you pray that, what are you asking God to give you?"

Sometimes beneath:

"Destroy them"

lies:

"Make me safe."

"Let somebody care."

"Please stop this happening again."

"Let my husband's death matter."

"Show me that evil does not rule the world."

Pastoral counselling listens beneath the curse for the wound that generated it.

14. Implications for African Churches

14.1 Teach the Imprecatory Psalms Rather Than Avoiding Them

Churches should not pretend these Psalms are absent from Scripture.

Avoidance leaves congregants to interpret them without theological guidance.

African scholarship already demonstrates the continuing vitality of Psalms 35 and 109 within Christian prayer cultures.

Pastors should teach their historical setting, poetic intensity, moral logic, and canonical relationship to enemy-love.

14.2 Replace "Death to My Enemies" with More Theologically Precise Prayer

Congregations can pray passionately without dehumanising opponents:

"Lord, expose evil."

"Stop those who shed innocent blood."

"Bring perpetrators to justice."

"Protect threatened communities."

"Break the structures that sustain violence."

"Give leaders courage to act."

"Convict those who kill."

"Turn their hearts from violence."

Such prayers remain forceful.

They simply refuse to make human destruction a Christian spiritual achievement.

14.3 Recover Communal Lament

African Christianity is often celebrated for exuberant worship.

It also needs robust lament.

The Church must have language for burned villages, murdered worshippers, abducted children, displacement, fear, and unanswered prayer.

Scholarship on the imprecatory Psalms argues that such difficult biblical language can provide sufferers with essential words for crying out against injustice rather than suppressing it.

14.4 Train Pastors in Trauma-Informed Care

Clergy working with violence-affected communities should understand trauma, bereavement, moral injury, anger, forgiveness, referral, and safeguarding.

The pastor should know when prayer is enough for the moment—and when it is not enough for the condition.

15. Implications for Peacebuilding

The Nigerian setting demonstrates why religious leadership can either escalate or reduce communal hostility.

Religious rhetoric matters.

A sermon that turns one perpetrator's identity into condemnation of an entire religious community may deepen conflict.

A sermon that denies religiously motivated persecution may silence victims.

The pastoral task is therefore truth without collective hatred.

Christian peacebuilding can hold together several commitments:

the protection of threatened Christians;

recognition of Muslim and other victims of extremist and communal violence;

accountability for perpetrators;

freedom of religion or belief;

interfaith cooperation where possible;

and rejection of revenge.

Recent religious-freedom reporting similarly demonstrates that Nigeria's challenges affect multiple religious communities, even while particular groups are targeted in specific contexts.

Christian theology should therefore be particular about injustice but universal about human dignity.

16. Discussion

The study's most important contribution lies in refusing two inadequate responses to imprecatory prayer.

The first says:

"Christians should never pray such prayers."

This can silence traumatised believers and deny them biblical language for unbearable injustice.

The second says:

"Because these prayers are biblical, anything prayed against an enemy is spiritually legitimate."

This can baptise vengeance.

A more responsible position lies between them.

Imprecatory prayer may function as **lament entrusted to God**, but it remains subject to the wider Christian canon and especially to Christ's teaching on enemies.

The prayer:

"God, judge them"

may therefore remain Christian when it means:

"I refuse to take vengeance into my own hands."

"I believe evil must be answered."

"I entrust judgement to You."

"Protect the innocent."

"Stop those who do violence."

"And do in them what I cannot presently imagine."

In this way, the imprecatory Psalm becomes less a permission slip for hatred and more a container within which hatred may eventually be transformed.

17. The Cross as Hermeneutical Centre

Christian interpretation of imprecatory prayer cannot end with the Psalms alone.

It must pass through the cross.

At the cross, Christianity refuses two easy conclusions.

It refuses to say evil does not matter.

And it refuses to say the evildoer is beyond redemption.

The crucifixion is a judgement upon violence precisely because violence does not have the final word.

Jesus' prayer for His executioners therefore does not sentimentalise His execution.

It exposes the radical nature of enemy-love.

Such love should never be demanded cheaply from trauma survivors.

It must emerge, if it emerges, through truth.

The Church should not stand over the wounded saying:

"Forgive quickly."

It should stand beside them saying:

"What happened was wrong. God sees. We will seek safety and justice with you. When you are ready, we will also help you discover what freedom from hatred might mean."

That is pastoral care.

18. Limitations

The study is qualitative and context-specific. Its 12 Nigerian interview participants and supplementary Ghanaian and Cameroonian materials cannot represent the full diversity of African Christian responses to persecution.

Second, conflict in Nigeria is highly complex. Religious identity interacts with political, ethnic, criminal, territorial, and economic factors, and the interpretation of particular incidents requires careful contextual evidence.

Third, the researcher's pastoral and theological position inevitably influenced interpretation. Reflexivity can moderate but not entirely remove this influence.

Fourth, participants' movement from imprecation toward intercession should not be universalised. Different survivors process trauma and forgiveness differently.

Fifth, the proposed **Lament–Justice–Intercession Framework** is a pastoral conceptual framework, not an empirically validated clinical intervention.

Finally, qualitative testimony concerning persecution should not be used to generate national casualty estimates. Claims about prevalence and attribution require independent conflict and human-rights data.

19. Directions for Future Research

Future studies should include larger samples of Nigerian Christians from multiple denominations, regions, and ethnic communities.

Comparative work involving Muslim survivors of extremist and communal violence could deepen understanding of how religious traditions shape prayer, justice, trauma, and reconciliation.

Longitudinal studies could examine whether prayer practices change over time following persecution.

Researchers might also study whether different forms of imprecatory prayer are associated with:

anger;

revenge motivation;

forgiveness;

religious coping;

trauma symptoms;

moral injury;

peacebuilding attitudes;

and willingness to engage in non-violent advocacy.

Research should further explore how pastors distinguish metaphorical spiritual-warfare language from rhetoric capable of encouraging hostility toward identifiable groups.

20. Conclusion

There is a difference between the prayer of a comfortable theologian discussing vengeance and the prayer of a widow kneeling beside an empty chair.

Pastoral theology must remember that difference.

When suffering Christians cry:

"How long, O Lord?"

the first responsibility of the Church is not to silence them.

It is to hear them.

The imprecatory Psalms remain difficult because human suffering is difficult. They preserve prayers we might prefer Scripture had softened.

Yet perhaps their presence is itself pastoral grace.

They tell the wounded person:

You may bring even this to God.

Bring the anger.

Bring the desire for justice.

Bring the question.

Bring the memory of what happened.

Bring the part of you that cannot yet forgive.

But bring it **to God**.

That final phrase changes everything.

Imprecation becomes spiritually dangerous when prayer is used to cultivate personal vengeance, demonise whole communities, or celebrate human destruction.

It becomes pastorally meaningful when it transfers vengeance from the injured person to divine judgement, names evil truthfully, seeks protection for victims, and leaves open the possibility that justice may include the transformation of the perpetrator.

Christian love does not ask the persecuted to pretend that evil is harmless.

It asks them not to become what wounded them.

Enemy-love is therefore not the denial of justice.

It is justice without hatred as its master.

It is resistance without dehumanisation.

It is lament without retaliation.

It is the courage to say:

"Lord, stop the violence."

"Vindicate the innocent."

"Bring the guilty to justice."

"Protect Your people."

and eventually, perhaps through tears:

"And change the hearts of those who hate us."

The movement from **lament to justice to intercession** does not make suffering less serious.

It makes Christian prayer more faithful to the whole biblical witness.

The persecuted Church should never be told that it must choose between justice and love.

Its harder calling is to hold both before God.

And when it does, imprecatory prayer need not become vengeance disguised as spirituality.

It can become the wounded soul's refusal to surrender either to evil or to hate.

Ethical and Confidentiality Statement

The study involved participants whose experiences included persecution, displacement, bereavement, and other potentially traumatic events. The source research reports informed consent, pseudonymisation, confidentiality, and the availability of pastoral follow-up. Identifying details should remain withheld in publication, and no unreported institutional ethics approval or reference number should be inferred or added.

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