

A H A N D O U T

Jesus Prays Psalm 83

A reflection for reading, slowly



He knew the psalm before he knew what it meant.

He would have learned it the way a boy learns anything — by hearing it, week on week, in the mouths of men older than him. Asaph's psalm. The one with the list of names in it. Edom, Moab, the Hagrites, Gebal. The names went past him for years before they landed.

Then, at some point, they landed.

They make shrewd plans against your people. They consult together with one accord.

He had been the hunted before he could walk. Soldiers in Bethlehem. The road into Egypt in the dark. His mother's face. He didn't remember it, but he had been told, and he knew the shape of it.

And he saw it again. In Nazareth they took him to the brow of the hill to throw him off. In Jerusalem they took counsel together. *They have consulted together with one accord; against you they make a covenant.* He didn't have to translate this psalm. He was standing inside it.

So when he prayed *let us wipe them out, that the name be remembered no more* — he was not reciting somebody else's fear.

Do to them as you did to Midian.

Here is where it would have caught in his throat.

Because the petition was granted. Not withheld — *granted*. The fire was available.

James and John saw a village that would not receive him and said: *Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven and consume them?* That is Psalm 83. That is verse fourteen with a

match in its hand. *Pursue them with your tempest. As fire consumes the forest, as flame sets the mountains ablaze.*

And he turned and rebuked them.

In the garden, with the torches coming through the trees and a sword already drawn, he said: *do you not think I could call on my Father, and he would at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?*

He could have. The psalm's answer was in his hand, every time, and every time he handed it back.

He did not stop praying the psalm. **He refused to execute it.**

That is not a man editing Scripture. That is a man who actually means the thing the psalm says: *God, you act. Not me.* The psalmist gives up the sword by praying. Jesus gave up the sword by praying — and then again in the garden, when it would have been so easy to take it up.

Fill their faces with shame, that they may seek your name, O LORD.

This is the line, and he knew it was the line.

The psalm does not end in ash. It ends in *seeking*. It ends in *knowing*. *Let them know that you alone, whose name is the LORD, are the Most High over all the earth.*

The whole terrible poem is reaching for that — for the enemy, ashamed, turning, and finally knowing God.

And he knew what it would cost to get them there.

. . .

So he prayed the psalm and became its answer.

The psalm asks God to move against the enemies of his people. In him, God moves.

And the moving is not fire on a mountain. It is a man on a hill outside a city, with the enemies of God gathered underneath him — and the wrath the psalm invited arriving, and landing, on *him*.

Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.

Hear it against the psalm. The last verse of Psalm 83 is a prayer that they would *know*. And here is the Son, at the cost of everything, buying that knowing for them.

He is not cancelling the psalm.

He is paying for it.

A reading, offered. Not the only one.

Hold it loosely, and hold it long.

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