

A dish best not served

The desire for revenge is sweeping our nation. How can Christians counter this?

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [March 2025](#) issue

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Century illustration

Seeking revenge is nothing new. It's existed in every human culture since ancient times. It has also appeared quite conspicuously on the political landscape of our time. I, for one, never imagined fantasies of retribution being displayed so aggressively by public officials and political influencers bearing grievance and resentment. The general public's growing tolerance for people who see themselves as wronged, and who delight in seeing others suffer at their hands, is astounding. Where does this tolerance for revenge, which Francis Bacon once called "a kind of

wild justice,” come from?

I remember being taught, even from my earliest *Children’s Illustrated Bible*, that inflicting intentional harm on someone whom we perceive to have wronged us is not our human business. It’s definitely not our right or privilege, and it ought to be outside the bounds of what we’re even willing to contemplate. Vengeance belongs to God alone (Rom. 12:19). And of particular interest to Christians, one would think, is the resurrected Lord returning to his communities not to make his killers pay but to offer them yet more love. Evidently, many find this magnanimity unconvincing, right alongside Jesus’ admonition to resist an eye-for-an-eye approach to life.

“I am your justice,” Donald Trump promised during a 2024 campaign event. “For those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution.” Here was a candidate for the presidency promising revenge on behalf of his supporters, mostly for personal grievances he was harboring. His campaign began issuing flags and collector coins with the words *Trump 2024 Revenge Tour*. The viciousness of his social posts escalated in complementary fashion.

Expressing spite and hostility for those one doesn’t like is hardly Trump’s innovation. But elevating the desire for retribution to the center of his campaign opened the door for all kinds of similar vindictive behavior by his followers. *Primarying* became the verb with which Trump acolytes threatened insufficiently loyal legislators. A promise to purge enemies became a talking point for multiple Trump cabinet nominees. “We’re going to come after you,” Kash Patel, Trump’s pick for FBI director, announced to the media.

Vengeful people don’t want to lose face, says social psychologist Ian McKee. Theirs is a rage motivated by power, authority, and anger. Revenge is a form of “narcissistic repair,” says Richard T. McClelland, who has written extensively about the whys of revenge. Those who brood over their resentments—a behavior from which we get the saying “revenge is a dish best served cold”—only deprive themselves of more rewarding and productive activities. “Vindictive persons live the life of witches,” wrote Francis Bacon. “A man that [stews over] revenge keeps his own wounds green, which otherwise would heal.”

My interest in this vengeance trend has little to do with any of us effectively dissuading others from finding pleasure in revenge. It’s rather a reminder that we best counter such behavior by anchoring our own lives more deeply in God.

Shalom Nagar was the prison guard chosen by lottery, against his will, to pull the lever that killed Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann on the gallows. For decades, Nagar lived out the trauma and guilt of that event in secrecy. When his identity was eventually revealed, a German television crew wanted to interview him about his sense of vengeance. He asked them to come to his study, where he devoted his days to the Torah. "I want the German people to know," he said, "that not only did Jewish people survive physically . . . but also that we are still learning Torah. I want them to see Jews alive and studying Torah . . . for the Torah lives, too."

To turn more attentively to the kind of life scripture proposes for us is the best antidote I know to America's growing addiction to revenge.