

The Imprecatory Psalms

Psalm 109

New American Standard Bible (NASB)

May 13, 2012

Vengeance Invoked upon Adversaries.

For the choir director. A Psalm of David.

O (A) God of my praise,

(B) Do not be silent!

2

*For they have opened the [a]wicked and (C)deceitful mouth against me;
They have spoken [b]against me with a (D)lying tongue.*

3

*They have also surrounded me with words of hatred,
And fought against me (E)without cause.*

4

*In return (F)for my love they act as my accusers;
But (G)I am in prayer.*

5

*Thus they have [c](H)repaid me evil for good
And (I)hatred for my love.*

6

*Appoint a wicked man over him,
And let an [d](J)accuser stand at his right hand.*

7

*When he is judged, let him (K)come forth guilty,
And let his (L)prayer become sin.*

8

*Let (M)his days be few;
Let (N)another take his office.*

9

*Let his (O)children be fatherless
And his (P)wife a widow.*

10

*Let his (Q)children wander about and beg;
And let them (R)seek sustenance [e]far from their ruined homes.*

11

*Let (S)the creditor [f]seize all that he has,
And let (T)strangers plunder the product of his labor.*

12

*Let there be none to [g](U)extend lovingkindness to him,
Nor (V)any to be gracious to his fatherless children.*

13

Let his (W)posterity be [h]cut off;

In a following generation let their (X)name be blotted out.

14

*Let (Y)the iniquity of his fathers be remembered [i]before the Lord,
And do not let the sin of his mother be (Z)blotted out.*

15

*Let (AA)them be before the Lord continually,
That He may (AB)cut off their memory from the earth;*

16

*Because he did not remember to show lovingkindness,
But persecuted the (AC)afflicted and needy man,
And the (AD)despondent in heart, to (AE)put them to death.*

17

*He also loved cursing, so (AF)it came to him;
And he did not delight in blessing, so it was far from him.*

18

*But he (AG)clothed himself with cursing as with his garment,
And it (AH)entered into [j]his body like water
And like oil into his bones.*

19

*Let it be to him as (AI)a garment with which he covers himself,
And for a belt with which he constantly (AJ)girds himself.*

20

*[k]Let this be the (AK)reward of my accusers from the Lord,
And of those who (AL)speak evil against my soul.*

21

*But You, O [l]God, the Lord, deal kindly with me (AM)for Your name's sake;
Because (AN)Your lovingkindness is good, deliver me;*

22

*For (AO)I am afflicted and needy,
And [m]my heart is (AP)wounded within me.*

23

*I am passing (AQ)like a shadow when it lengthens;
I am shaken off (AR)like the locust.*

24

*My (AS)knees [n]are weak from (AT)fasting,
And my flesh has grown lean, without fatness.*

25

*I also have become a (AU)reproach to them;
When they see me, they (AV)wag their head.*

26

*(AW)Help me, O Lord my God;
Save me according to Your lovingkindness.*

27

*[o]And let them (AX)know that this is Your hand;
You, Lord, have done it.*

28

*(AY)Let them curse, but You bless;
When they arise, they shall be ashamed,
But Your (AZ)servant shall be glad.*

29

**[p]Let (BA)my accusers be clothed with dishonor,
And [q]let them (BB)cover themselves with their own shame as with a robe.**

30

**With my mouth I will give thanks abundantly to the Lord;
And in the midst of many (BC)I will praise Him.**

31

**For He stands (BD)at the right hand of the needy,
To save him from those who (BE)judge his soul.**

Intro: Story-telling..... let me tell you a story, and you tell me what comes to mind...

I have this friend.... My friend is very “nice” and “well adjusted” in every foreseeable way – at least in regards to what we can all see on the outside.... To help you understand the situation, my friend does not “stick out” in any obvious ways... In fact, the most noticeable thing about my friend, is that he blends in with most everyone around him. He’s noticeably un-noticeable. In a very real sense, my friend is very much like you and me...

Anyway.... So one day SOMETHING HAPPENED... something CHANGED! My friend was suddenly forced to deal with a set of circumstances that he never even imagined. Yet, as shocked as he was, the **reality** of his situation **forced him to deal with his challenge**. By the way, his challenge was a painful challenge. Worse yet (or so my friend thought), was the fact that there was inevitably MORE PAIN TO COME.

You see... my friend knew that a “CHOICE to DO NOTHING,” while appearing to be the “EASY WAY OUT,” would, in reality, only **prolong the pain AND extend the problem**. On the other hand, to address the issue head on... which was the **ONLY REAL WAY** to RESOLVE the PROBLEM, would certainly involve more discomfort and the RISK of WHO KNOWS WHAT....

My friend’s fear of the unknown and affection for the status quo threatened to paralyze him...

I think we’ve all been there at some point in our lives.... Can you relate?

Well... let me tell you the rest of the story and how things turned out. Let me start by filling in some of the important details.

- How many of us have come to realize that the details matter in challenging situations?
- CONTEXT IS CRUCIAL!!!
- Most of the time... WE CANNOT HELP WHAT WE DO NOT PROPERLY UNDERSTAND

Back to my friend... You see... My friend’s problem is that he had developed an incredibly painful tooth-ache... In fact, the tooth ache had become so dreadful that my friend was truly devastated AND debilitated!

Are you ready for this.... My friend hadn’t been to a dentist in decades!

- My friend said he didn’t like dentists...
 - ...the sound of the drills were like fingernails on the chalkboard...
 - ...it’s just “un-natural” having people’s hands in your mouth...
 - ...I would rather miss out on the good, just to avoid the discomfort...
 - ...sometimes the “cures” were painful to receive...

- ...it “costs too much” – Do you know what I was expected to pay???

Here comes the story’s sad but truthful hook....

- Sometimes... like my friend... we can find ourselves shocked by the reality of a new and totally unexpected challenge
- Sometimes... like in my friend’s situation... the problem can bring with it some pain... some very REAL & RAW PAIN.
- Again... Sometimes... like my friend... we can be so afraid of hearing the truth that we choose instead to accommodate the debilitating pain inherent in the status quo...
- PRAISE GOD! There is a Solution... there is a Way...

- This morning I want to take you to the Divine Dentist and walk you through one way that He has shown us for dealing with spiritual “tooth” decay...

WARNING: For some of you, what follows will be as unfamiliar AND uncomfortable as the dentist’s chair was for my friend.

BUT... don’t let your discomfort dissuade you... the medicine of truth in love heals

Sometimes the ONLY way to *heal the mouth* is to pull the tooth!

There are times when the only loving thing to do is pull a tooth...

The million dollar question:

Did the dentist pull the tooth as an act of “personal tooth-hatred,” relational-revenge, or mean-spirited malice? Or, by contrast, did the dentist pull the tooth because it was damaging the person’s mouth, their over-all health, and the individual’s long-term well-being?

Psalm 109 Imprecatory Psalms

109:8 is quoted by Peter in reference to Judas (the betrayer)...

See Acts 1:20 which quotes Psalm 109...

See Matthew 26:24.... “Woe unto the man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed!”

Ephesians 4:26... “Be angry and sin not.”

“If we take care of God’s honor, He will take care of ours.” – Charles Spurgeon

Do the Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics Clash?

BY JASON JACKSON

Read the following text from Psalm 69.

22 Let their table before them become a snare; And when they are in peace, let it become a trap.

23 Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see; And make their loins continually to shake.

24 Pour out thine indignation upon them, And let the fierceness of thine anger overtake them.

25 Let their habitation be desolate; Let none dwell in their tents.

26 For they persecute him whom thou hast smitten; And they tell of the sorrow of those whom thou hast wounded.

27 Add iniquity unto their iniquity; And let them not come into thy righteousness.

28 Let them be blotted out of the book of life, And not be written with the righteous.

Does this text bother you? Do you find it difficult to reconcile the “harsh” language of this passage with others so brimming with love like this one?: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Troubled souls often raise such questions: If all parts of the Bible are equally inspired, how do you explain passages like Psalms 69:22-28, which call for punishment upon one’s enemies? How can you harmonize this judgemental attitude with Jesus’ teaching that we should love our enemies?

Several explanations have been offered:

1. Some writers believe these passages reflect a lower standard of ethics than that espoused by Christ. They allege that this sub-Christian ethic was characteristic of Old Testament times, and that such texts were included in the ancient Scriptures because of “progressive revelation.”

2. Others claim that the composers of these psalms speak in the indicative mood (the “explanatory” mood), and not in the “imperative mood” (the mood of command or request). That is, they merely were stating what **would happen** to the wicked; they were not actually **asking** God to destroy the wicked.
3. Still, another group of scholars advocate that the psalms are an accurate record of what the psalmists were **feeling**, but there is no divine approval for the sentiments. Rather, God would have us to love our enemies.

Before responding to these explanations, we need to consider some principles that must guide any endeavor to understand the meaning of Scripture.

1) We must bear in mind that “every scripture is inspired of God” (2 Timothy 3:16). The book of Psalms belongs in the Bible; it is inspired of God. Our Lord asserted that when David wrote in “the book of Psalms” (Psalm 110) he spoke “in the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 22:43). Christ quoted from the Psalms, and considered them to be on the same plane as the Law and the Prophets (cf. Luke 24:44).

Likewise, the writer of Hebrews, when quoting from the Psalms, often identified a passage as having been spoken by the Holy Spirit (cf. Hebrews 3:7). Any view that would diminish the integrity of Psalms is an attack on inspiration, hence upon God himself.

(2) We must remember that any difficulty that exists in coming to an understanding of this issue is in **our** minds; the fault is not with the text itself. The Holy Spirit, the ultimate author of the Psalms, and Jesus, the Son of God, are not in conflict with one another.

In consideration of Psalm 69:22-28, we must first observe that this passage belongs to a type of Old Testament literature known as the imprecatory psalms. A number of these psalms appear throughout the inspired collection, wherein the authors pray for the destruction (imprecation) of their enemies, often employing the most vivid language (see Psalms 55, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137).

In light of these principles, let us examine the previously noted explanations of these difficult passages.

(1) Is the “sub-Christian theory” a valid explanation for these passages? No, it isn’t. It reflects a misunderstanding of progressive revelation, promoting the idea that the Christian ideal was a development of religious thought over several centuries. This view fails to recognize that the ultimate author of these inspired prayers was the same one who

revealed the New Testament.

As Gleason Archer noted: “Progressive revelation is not to be thought of as a progress from error to truth, but rather as a progress from the partial and obscured to the complete and clear” (1974, 460).

By way of contrast, we actually find a wonderfully high ethic reflected in many of the psalms—an ethic that is consistent with New Testament revelation.

We submit that the sub-Christian theory is woefully misguided and is based on an erroneous presupposition.

(2) Was the Psalmist simply explaining what would happen to the wicked (the “indicative theory”)? Some imprecatory statements may fit with this theory, but this explanation certainly does not satisfy the entire spectrum of these prayers of condemnation—some of which make actual request of God to destroy the enemy.

(3) Are the psalms merely a record of what someone said, just as, for example, the New Testament contains the words of Pilate, Judas, and others—accurately recorded, but not an example to be followed?

It is true that some passages in the Bible are inspired only to the degree that they merely are a correct record of what was said, i.e., the Holy Spirit ensured that the account was recorded without error. This view, however—as it pertains to these passages—fails to take into account what the Bible **actually says**. Nowhere are the words of Pilate, Judas, etc., **attributed to the Holy Spirit**.

On the other hand, David (and the other psalmists) wrote “in the Spirit” while composing psalms. We therefore find this view lacking a proper concept of the Psalms’ inspiration.

How, then, can we resolve the seeming difficulty of the inspired text speaking in one place of hatred for enemies, and yet, in another, enjoining love for one’s enemies?

(1) We must take into account that the Old Testament did encourage a high ethic in dealing with one’s fellow-man (see Leviticus 19:18), just as the New Testament requires us to “abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good” even today (Romans 12:9).

(2) Probably the most important key to understanding this issue is this: David is not praying to God out of malice and vindictiveness against someone he dislikes personally. It is not a matter of **personal revenge**; rather, these “harsh” statements reflect David’s awareness of God’s justice and his intolerance for sin.

Walter Kaiser has observed:

They [these hard sayings] are not statements of personal vendetta, but they are utterances of zeal for the kingdom of God and his glory. To be sure, the attacks which provoked these prayers were not from personal enemies; rather, they were rightfully seen as attacks against God and especially his representatives in the promised line of the Messiah (1988, 172).

(3) Sin has not disappeared, and there are still enemies of the redemptive plan of God. God feels the same today toward rebellion as he did in David's time. The Bible is not in conflict with itself over truths written in plain prose in both Testaments—namely, the righteous will be rewarded, and the wicked shall be punished (cf. Psalm 1; Matthew 25:46).

If these prayers of malediction were intrinsically sinful, one would have a difficult time explaining the Lord's "curse" upon Capernaum (Matthew 11:23-24), Paul's prayer of anathema upon false teachers (Galatians 1:8-9), the apostle's denunciation of Alexander the coppersmith (2 Timothy 4:14), and the prayer of those martyrs who, under the altar of God, asked for vengeance from the Lord (Revelation 6:10).

C. S. Lewis was correct when he wrote: "[T]he ferocious parts of the Psalms serve as a reminder that there is in the world such a thing as wickedness and that . . . is hateful to God" (1958, 33).

Alexander McClaren challenges the modern reader, "Perhaps, it would do modern tenderheartedness no harm to have a little more iron infused into its gentleness, and to lay to heart that the King of Peace must first be King of Righteousness" (1892, 375).

(4) We must bear in mind what it means to love enemies. As William Holladay put it: "The call to love one's enemies must be exercised within the context of the claims of justice: if an injustice has been done, then it needs to be made right" (1993, 311-12).

The Greek word used in connection with the love of enemies is *agape*. This is a love of the will whereby one chooses to treat others, even enemies, within the context of their eternal welfare. God has proved his *agape* to us, in that while we were yet enemies, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8).

Loving one's enemies would be expressed in the following thoughtful actions: one would pray for them, be reconciled to them (if possible), do good to them (e.g., feeding them – cf. Matthew 5:44; 5:25; Luke 6:27; Romans 12:20). The goal is that by one's good works, he may convert the enemy (cf. Matthew 5:13-16; 1 Peter 2:12).

However, if a person chooses to remain an "enemy of the cross"

(Philippians 3:18) and continues to afflict us, Paul warns that justice will be served by God “at the revelation of our Lord Jesus from heaven with the angels of his power in flaming fire, rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-9).

This is not a desire for personal revenge; rather it is a comfort that the will of God shall prevail.

May God help us to deepen our concern for the souls of people. Too, may we desire to see every wicked way abolished, so that people will be rescued from the destiny of the wicked.

A love for truth will inevitably lead to a hatred of error (Amos 5:15). A love for righteousness will direct us to have a hatred for wickedness. All the while, we must love the enemy, while we hate the enmity. We must be concerned for their souls, and treat them accordingly.

A. F. Kirkpatrick admonishes: “Men have need to beware lest in pity for the sinner they condone the sin, or relax the struggle against evil” (1906, xciii).

The difficulty for many, presented in these passages, may not be in understanding them, nor in reconciling the teaching of Scripture. Rather, the challenge is **bringing our lives to conform to God’s will**.

Sources/Footnotes

4. Archer, Gleason. 1974. *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press.
5. Holladay, William. 1993. *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
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7. Kirkpatrick, A. F. 1906. *The Book of Psalms*. Cambridge, England: University Press.
8. Lewis, C. S. 1958. *Reflections on the Psalms*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, and Co.
McClaren, Alexander. 1892. *The Psalms*. Vol. 3. New York, NY: George Doran Company.

How to Understand the Imprecatory Psalms.

Introduction

The idea of a righteous man who is gracious, loving, and forgiving is not often seen as one who prays curses upon people or desires to have their enemies’ children dashed against rocks.^[1] But this is the dilemma found in Scripture. The Bible affirms both of these ideas—to love one’s neighbor and yet at the

same time desire to see God destroy that which is evil. Lewis has noted, "In some of the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth."^[2] In fact, the imprecatory Psalms are so offensive that contemporary priests and monastics are no longer obliged to read them.^[3]

The imprecatory prayer will be examined in this paper. The paper will begin with a brief definition of what an imprecation is, as well as what the foundation for an imprecation is. Then the paper will go into the book of Genesis and show the blossoming of the imprecatory prayer throughout Scripture all the way to Revelation. The conclusion will include ideas concerning whether the imprecatory prayer is to be practiced anymore.

The definition of an "Imprecation"

Laney defines an imprecation as, "invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or the enemies of God."^[4] Imprecations were quite common in the Ancient Near East. The Ancient Near Eastern Texts (ANET) are filled with all types of curses and incantations to cure one from an imprecation.^[5] Biblically, imprecations are done by God's people who are seen as righteous and their enemy as the manifestation of evil. In short, an imprecation is a cry from the righteous for justice.^[6]

The foundation for the imprecatory prayer

Almost all scholars agree that the groundwork for the imprecatory prayers of the saints is based upon the Abrahamic Covenant. Day writes,

...they [the imprecatory Psalms] root their theology of the cursing, of crying out for God's vengeance expressed in the Song of Moses (Dt. 32:1-43), the principle of divine justice outlined in the lex talionis (e.g. 19:16-21), and the assurance of divine cursing as well as blessing in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:2-3)...^[7]

The Abrahamic Covenant, which is introduced in Genesis 12:1-2, is likely what saints, throughout Scripture, claim as their promise and foundation for their prayers of imprecation.

Genesis 12:3 states, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Here we find the foundation for why Abraham and his descendants would have

prayed an imprecation on their enemies. This is something God had promised Abraham from the *beginning*. We see this idea reiterated in Deuteronomy 32:1-43. So when Moses, David, and Asaph pray for God to judge their enemies, they are in fact merely asking God to fulfill what He had promised to do.

This idea is developed at the giving of the Mosaic Law. In Deuteronomy 27-28 God reveals that He will judge according to these laws. Anyone who keeps these laws He will surely bless. However, anyone who neglects the law will be cursed.^[8] This will be an important point and will be brought out later.

How should the imprecatory Psalms be understood?

There are over 30 Psalms that contain a clear imprecation.^[9] They are typically broken up into three major categories. They are as follows: societal enemies, national enemies, personal enemies. Because of the harsh language, many have seen the Psalms as barbaric, vindictive, and out of place with the teachings of Jesus.^[10] However, this idea must be rejected. When these prayers are examined in light of the context, these statements could not be further from the truth. First, the context is grounded in a promise by God (Gen. 12:2-3). Second, the prayers of the saints are never asking to take vengeance for their own sake, rather, they are asking God to do what is just according to His promise (Psalm 6:4b; 7:6; 28:4; 31:15; 40:13; 70:5; 109:120). Third, these prayers are always a type or picture of the innocent pleading against the guilty to the judge (7:3-6; 9:12b; 28:4-5; 31:6). Fourth, these prayers represent the needy who have nothing and no one to defend them but God (Psalm 10:10; 69:1-4; 137). Fifth, it is a cry for justice to a just God (Psalm 1:6; 10:5; 17:9-13; 35:23-24). Sixth, they are a cry for God to defend His name and glory (Psalm 5:11; 6:4; 7:11; 10:3; 28:5; 31:6; 35:9; 58:11). Seventh, the prayers do not see themselves as faultless, but rather those who turn to the LORD (Psalm 5:7-8b; 6:1-4; 10:12-13; 31:6-10).

Imprecatory prayer throughout Scripture

The idea of God cursing is found as early as the first few chapters in Genesis (2:15-1; 3:14-1-9; 4:10-12). We see God speaking to man and holding him accountable to his actions. "You obey me and you will be blessed, you disobey me and you will be cursed." God then selects a specific people to be His to be blessed and be a means of blessing to all nations (Gen. 12:2-3; 15:1-6; 17:1-14). However, YEHWEH later gives these people a law by which He will bless and curse (Dt. 27-28). In fact, the law instructs Israel to destroy all enemies of their God (Dt. 2:26-37; 3:1-22; 7).^[11] All of this is commanded while there law also instructed Israel not to hate and to leave vengeance to the LORD (Dt.

32:35; Lev. 19:17-18). Soon after this, Israel goes through a roller coaster of blessing and cursing. Later, God appoints a King for His people. This King represents God on earth for His people. It is the King's responsibility to uphold the laws and defend and provide for God's people. It is during the reign of King David that much of the imprecatory Psalms are written. Although David is the author of the majority of imprecatory Psalms when examined in the narratives concerning him, few would see him as vindictive (2 Sam. 16:11; 19:16-23).

[12] However, one could see David's prayer as one for vindication. As Israel continues on, it gradually falls further and further away from God. God sends them corrupt leaders as a judgment. Then God sends more wicked nations to judge them. Throughout this entire time God is raising up prophets who speak on His behalf to repent so that blessings may come. Hosea is one of those prophets. Hosea begins his pronouncement against pagan gentile nations. But the seventh nation listed under his pronouncement of judgment is against Judah. Lessing states,

From 1:3 through 2:5 Amos's audience in all likelihood cheered and applauded after each neighboring nation was condemned. "Great preacher, this Amos!" was the mantra of the moment. The sermon builds to a climax as three, four, five nations are placed under divine fire. With the next judgment pointing to Judah (2:4-5), the number reaches seven.[13]

From Genesis to Malachi Scripture shows a curse remaining on God's people for failure to fulfill what was required of them. And yet the imprecatory Psalms teach of God visiting sin and justly destroying it and having mercy and forgiving sin. How these two both are true is revealed in the New Testament. Although at the close of the Old Testament Israel does not look too good, there is promise of a New Covenant God will make with them and will bring about His original promise with certainty (Jer. 31:31-40; Ez. 36-37).

After four hundred years of silence from God, He sends a prophet to prepare the way for the Messiah who will then inaugurate the "New Covenant." John the Baptist is seen as one who warns Israel of God's soon judgment/curse. When Jesus comes on the scene, He continues to follow what was taught in the Law of Moses while developing the ideas found there. Jesus explains how the tension can be understood better of how one can hate evil and yet love his enemy (Matt. 5:29-30, 43-45). Jesus does not teach one idea as supreme over the other, or teach only one at the neglect of another. In fact, Jesus practices both (Matt. 5:43-45; Lk. 17:11-19; Matt. 11:20-24; 23:13-39; Mk. 11:14).

Martin Luther explains how Christians should understand the two without sacrificing one. He says,

We should pray that our enemies be converted and become our friends and, if not, that their doing and designing be bound to fail and have not success and that their persons perish rather than the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ.^[14]

The blessings and cursings do not end with Jesus' teachings though. The Apostles are seen continuing in the line of saints who will pray prayers of imprecation (Acts 5:3-4,7-10; 8:20; Gal. 1:8-9; 5:12; 2 Pet. 2:14; Jude 11-13)^[15]. Peter curses Simon the Magician and yet extends an opportunity for repentance.^[16] Paul gives a warning/imprecation to anyone who teaches a false gospel. Even the saints who die for Christ in Revelation are seen as praying imprecations on the unjust! In fact, the imagery given in Revelation is the saint's prayers going up to God in His holy sanctuary and then later being poured out on the wicked.^[17] This prayer of the saints has an illusion back to the imprecatory Psalms.^[18] The imprecatory prayer is seen throughout scripture. However, the idea of repentance and desire to see the wicked converted is developed more in the New Testament, while holding to a love and desire for God to uphold justice and display His righteousness.

Conclusion and Application

Although it is difficult for the American Church to understand the fullness of the imprecatory prayer, it may come easier should persecution come upon her. However, traditionally the Church has held dearly to these Psalms and prayers when under severe suffering (2 Thess. 1:5-12).^[19] For the Christian, he should look to the cross whenever contemplating the curse motif in Scripture. This is because Jesus bore the curse for all, some to salvation and some to postpone the curse on the unbelieving.^[20]

Sadly, the response in America has typically been to skip over, ignore, and often feel shame for having these verses in the Bible. Kelley states, "Our responsibility is to listen."^[21] The Christian should not see the imprecatory prayer as one to be ceased in the practice of the everyday believer, nor as sinful. The saints in heaven (sinless) pray these prayers to God even today (Rev. 6:9-11). Instead like Jesus, Peter, and Paul the desire of every Christian should be to see all come to repentance and yet if that not be God's sovereign will, then for God to deal justly with the unbelieving according to their deeds.

Footnotes:

^[1] e.g. Matthew 5:44; Psalms 137:9. ^[2] C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Orlando, FL.: Harcourt Brace, 1958), 23. ^[3] Gary A. Anderson, "King David and the Psalms of Imprecation," *PRO ECCLESIA* 15 (2006) 267

[267-280]. [4] Carl J. Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," BIBLIOTHECA SACRA 549 (1981) 35 [35-45]. [5] Reed Lessing, "Broken Teeth, Bloody Baths, and Baby Bashing: Is There Any Place in the Church for Imprecatory Psalms?" CONCORDIA Journal 32 (2006): 369 [368-370]. [6] Ibid., 369. [7] John N. Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics," BIBLIOTHECA SACRA 159 (2002):168 [166-186]. [8] Earl S. Kaliand, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 3: 163. [9] Reed Lessing, "Broken Teeth, Bloody Baths, and Baby Bashing: Is There Any Place in the Church for Imprecatory Psalms?" CONCORDIA Journal 32 (2006): 368 [368-370]. [10] Ibid., 368. [11] J. Denney, *A Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings, vol. 1 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishing, 1988), 534. [12] Carl J. Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," BIBLIOTHECA SACRA 549 (1981) 42 [35-45]. [13] Reed Lessing, "Upsetting the Status Quo: Preaching like Amos," CONCORDIA 33 (2007): 288 [285-298]. [14] Martin Luther, *Luther's Works: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*, A.T.W. Steinhäuser, [St. Louis: Concordia, 1956], 1000. [15] Edwin A. Blum, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 12: 391-392. [16] Richard N. Longenecker, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Act* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 110-110. [17] Robert L. Thomas, "The Imprecatory Prayers of the Apocalypse," BIBLIOTHECA SACRA 502 (1969): 123 [123-131]. [18] G.K. Beale, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Apollos, 2007), 1104. [19] Raymond F. Surburg, "The Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms," *Springfielder* 39 (1975): 100. [20] Roy B. Zuck "God's Wrath Postponed," BIBLIOTHECA SACRA 657 (2008): 106 [106]. [21] Kelley H. Page, "Prayers of Troubled Saints," *Review and Expositor* 81 (1984): 379 [377-383].

The Imprecatory Psalms

We use the term "imprecatory psalms" to describe those psalms that contain curses or prayers for the punishment of the psalmist's enemies. We will study each of these curses in our commentary on the psalms in which they occur, but here we would like to summarize some of the general principles which apply to all of them.

People are often shocked by some of the prayers in the psalms. One of the harshest is the prayer against the Babylonians in Psalm 137: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us--who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." Similar prayers are contained in Psalms 55, 56, 58, 69, 109 and other psalms.

Many commentators dismiss these prayers as remnants of a less developed stage of religion, which we have now outgrown. They claim that such prayers are no longer valid in New Testament times, since we are now told to love our enemies and not to take revenge (Matthew 5:38-44). Such claims, however, are not supported by a careful study of these psalms or of the rest of Scripture. These prayers, harsh as they sound, were proper prayers when they were first uttered, and they are still proper today.

These curses are part of God's inspired word. It is true that Scripture sometimes reports improper statements made by believers in moments of distress. For example, not all of the statements made by Job and his friends in the book of Job were proper. However, the curses in the psalms do not fall into this category, because Scripture itself shows that they were proper prayers. Several of these curses occur in Messianic psalms as the words of Christ himself. For example, one of the strongest curses is recorded in Psalm 69, a Messianic psalm quoted in the New Testament: "May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous" (Psalm 69:28). Curses found in Psalms 69 and 109 are quoted by Peter in Acts 1:20 as finding their fulfillment in God's judgment on Judas.

These curses can hardly be explained away as due to a bloodthirsty, vengeful spirit on the part of David. On the contrary, David was an example of patience, who on more than one occasion refused to avenge himself on his persecutor Saul (1 Samuel 24 and 26). If David had a weakness in this regard, it was being too lenient with such offenders as Shimei, who cursed him (2 Samuel 16), and his son Absalom, who rebelled against him (2 Samuel 18, 19). David refused to seek personal vengeance on his enemies, but he could hardly pray that Saul should win or that God's promise to David, which included the promise of the Savior, should be overthrown by Saul or Absalom. He very properly opposed their schemes with prayer.

Luther once commented that we cannot pray the Lord's Prayer without cursing. Every time we pray, "Hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done," we are praying that the plans of Satan and all who serve him will fail and that they will receive the judgement which they deserve. We should indeed pray that God will lead our enemies to repentance and forgiveness as Christ and Stephen did, but we must also pray that all who continue to defy God will receive the justice they deserve.

God is a God of absolute holiness. It is in harmony with God's character and his attributes revealed in Scripture when the psalmist prays, "If only you would slay the wicked, O God!..Do I hate those who hate you, O LORD, and abhor those who rise up against you?" (Psalm 139:19-21). When the psalmist uttered such prayers, his concern was for God's glory and for the success of God's plans.

The psalmist (or in some cases the Messiah, who was speaking through him) was being persecuted "without cause," since the attacks on him were not because of anything he had done, but because of his role in God's plans (Psalms 69:4,7,9; 35:19, 109:3). Even

when the psalmist prayed such prayers, he still hoped that God's judgements would serve as a warning that would lead at least some of the wicked to repentance. "Cover their faces with shame so that men will seek your name, O LORD" (Psalm 83:16).

Similar prayers for God to display his justice occur in the New Testament. Paul prayed for God's judgment against those who opposed his preaching of the gospel (Galatians 1:8, 2 Timothy 4:14). Even the saints in heaven pray, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Revelation 6:10).

Scripture delivers strong warnings against taking personal vengeance on our enemies, but it also promises us that the just God will repay the wicked. "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). To punish the ungodly with force is the duty of God and of government as the servant of God, but we should oppose the enemies of God with prayer.

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