

...Let's take note of ten things we should know about imprecations in the psalms.

(1) What we read in these OT Psalms are not emotionally uncontrolled outbursts by otherwise sane and compassionate people. Imprecations such as those listed above are found in high poetry and are the product of reasoned meditation (not to mention divine inspiration!). They are calculated petitions, not spontaneous explosions of a bad temper. Certainly, there are examples in OT history and prose narrative of actions and attitudes that are sinful and not to be emulated. But the psalms are expressions of public worship to be modeled.

(2) We should remember that in Deuteronomy 27-28 the Levites pronounce imprecations against Israel if she proves unfaithful to the covenant. Israel, in accepting the law, brought herself under its sanctions. She in essence pronounced curses upon herself should she break the covenant, and God looked on their response with favor. In other words, God's people were commanded to pray for God's curses upon themselves if they forsook him! We must never think that God is any less severe on his own covenant people than he is on the unbelieving nations who are regularly given to idolatry.

(3) These prayers are not expressions of personal vengeance. In fact, most imprecations are in psalms written by David, perhaps the least vengeful man in the OT (consider his dealings with Saul, Nabal, Absalom, Shimei, etc.; see especially 2 Sam. 24:12). David never asks that he be allowed to "get even" with or "pay back" his enemies. His prayer is that God would act justly in dealing with transgressors. There is a vast difference between vindication and vindictiveness. David's passion was for the triumph of divine justice, not the satisfaction of personal malice. The OT was as much opposed to seeking personal vengeance against one's personal enemies as is the NT (see Exod. 23:4-5; Lev. 19:17-18).

(4) We also must remember that imprecations are nothing more than human prayers based on divine promises. One is simply asking God to do what he has already said he will do (often repeatedly throughout the Psalms themselves). For example, in Matthew 7:23 Jesus declares that on the day of judgment he will say to hypocrites, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness." Is it wrong for us to pray that Jesus do precisely that? Is it wrong for us to build a prayer on a promise? "Oh, Lord, cause those to depart from you who do evil," appears to be a perfectly legitimate petition.

(5) Imprecations are expressions provoked by the horror of sin. David prayed this way because of his deep sensitivity to the ugliness of evil. Perhaps the chief reason why he wasn't bothered by prayers of imprecation and we are is that he was bothered by sin and we aren't! It is frightening to think that we can stand in the presence of evil and not be moved to pray as David did.

(6) The motivation behind such prayers is zeal for God's righteousness, God's honor, God's reputation, and the triumph of God's kingdom. Is our willingness to ignore blasphemy and overlook evil due to a deficiency in our love for God and his name? Could our reaction to the imprecatory psalms be traced to the fact that we love men and their favor more than we love God and his?

(7) Another factor to keep in mind is that David, being king, was God's representative on earth. Thus, an attack on David was, in effect, an attack on God. David's enemies were not his private opponents but adversaries of God. David's ire is aroused because they "speak against you [God] with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain! Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?" (Psalm 139:20-21; cf. Psalm 5:10; emphasis mine).

(8) The prayers of imprecation are rarely, if ever, for the destruction of a specific individual but almost always of a class or group, namely, "the wicked" or "those who oppose Thee".

(9) We must keep in mind that in most instances these prayers for divine judgment come only after extended efforts on the part of the psalmist to call the enemies of God to repentance.

(10) David knows that he needs spiritual protection lest he "hate" God's enemies for personal reasons. That is why he concludes Psalm 139 with the prayer that God purify his motives and protect his heart:

Therefore, when David speaks of "hatred" for those who oppose God's kingdom he is neither malicious nor bitter nor vindictive, nor moved by self-centered resentment. But he most certainly is jealous for God's name and firmly at odds with those who blaspheme.

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