



Another Look at the Imprecatory Psalms

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March 31, 2016

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INTRODUCTION

With the exception of Psalm 23, the Psalms are generally avoided by most pastors for preaching material¹, but of the Psalms, none are more avoided than the Imprecatory Psalms (5, 6, 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 109, 137 and 139). Imprecatory Psalms are those which are “an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or the enemies of God.”² Their call for the annihilation of God’s enemies makes most readers uncomfortable and finds them difficult to reconcile with New Testament teaching. There is much debate among scholars regarding the proper application of the Imprecatory Psalms and many explanations have been suggested as to how one should read them. In order to explain these psalms, some have chosen to question the human speaker in order to try to limit their understanding as only a record of fact being cried from a hurting human heart, and not as inspired words. Similarly, they are explained as prayers offered to God, wrongly. Other explanations have insisted that these psalms were words of prophetic utterance and were communicating the eventual calamity of God’s enemies and did not reflect the desire of the speaker. Still others have suggested that the retaliatory nature of these Psalms reflects the covenantal nature of the Psalms as a whole,

¹W. H. Bellinger, Jr., "Let the Words of My Mouth: Proclaiming the Psalms," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 27 (Fall 1984): 17; and Ronald Barclay Allen, *Praise! A Matter of Life and Breath* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), pp. 17-18.

²J. Carl Lanley. A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981) 35-45 1981. Dallas Theological Seminary. p. 35.

revealing the general idea that the wicked perish and the righteous prosper. Others have suggested that these Psalms were valid in Old Testament times, but not for the dispensation of the Church. Most dangerous is the idea that these Psalms are sub-Christian, meaning that they were written prior to Christian understanding, and that progressive knowledge corrects erroneous belief. Each of these ideas will be examined; however, Christians seem hesitant to acknowledge that it is consistent with God's holy and just nature to judge sin and His enemies.

THE DIFFICULTIES WITH IMPRECATORY PSALMS

Every Christian is fully aware that Jesus taught his disciples to love their enemies. This command from Matthew 5 is from the beloved Sermon on the Mount.

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’
44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. – Matthew 5:43-48³

Verse 44 makes it clear that Christians are called to pray for those who persecute them; how seemingly contrary to Psalm 58.

Break the teeth in their mouths, O God;
Lord, tear out the fangs of those lions!
Let them vanish like water that flows away;

³ All scripture references are NIV unless otherwise indicated.

when they draw the bow, let their arrows fall short.
May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along,
like a stillborn child that never sees the sun.
Before your pots can feel the heat of the thorns—
whether they be green or dry—the wicked will be swept away.
¹⁰The righteous will be glad when they are avenged,
when they dip their feet in the blood of the wicked.— Psalms 58:6-10

Not very complimentary, these prayers seem to contradict the essence of the goodness and grace of God. How gruesome, that the righteous shall be glad when they dip their feet in blood. These songs appear to oppose the Christian's mandate to love. In fact, these songs may sound more horrific than modern "gansta rap". Christians have distanced themselves from these Psalms with statements like:

"These psalms are an embarrassment to many Christians who see them in tension with Jesus' teaching on love of enemies."⁴

"The imprecatory psalms have been explained as expressing (a) evil emotions, either to be avoided altogether or to be expressed and relinquished, (b) a morality consonant with the Old Covenant but inconsistent with the New,"⁵

How should a Christian today read these verses and apply them in their lives? Should a Christian pray these kinds of prayers? Can a Christian find comfort in the Imprecatory Psalms?

Too many students of the Bible rush past these difficult passages, searching for easier "grass", to be consumed quickly and comfortably. Psalm 23, for example, brings much delight and safety to the reader, and like lambs the student refuses to toil with these more difficult

⁴ Chad Brand et al., eds., "Imprecation, Imprecatory Psalms," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 812.

⁵ John N. Day 2002. "The imprecatory psalms and Christian ethics." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 634: 166-186. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

passages. This puts the pastor, teacher, and Bible student into a perilous position; for if one accepts 2 Timothy 3:16-17, then it is wrong to pass over these verses as insignificant.

“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

Compounding the issue, is the revelation that the Bible contains many more verses of scripture which are imprecatory than just a few Psalms. *The Song of the Sea*, the famous passage from Exodus, rejoices over the destruction of God’s enemies. Elsewhere,

The morning prayer of Moses was an imprecation that the enemies of Yahweh, who were Moses' enemies as well, would be scattered and flee from His presence (Num. 10:35). The Song of Deborah and Barak concludes with an imprecation that Yahweh's enemies might perish (Judg. 5:31). Jeremiah the prophet used repeated imprecations against his enemies (Jer. 11:20; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21-23; 20:12). Such imprecations are not limited to the Old Testament, but are found in the New Testament as well (Rev. 6:9-10). Other portions of the New Testament are considered by some to contain imprecations (Acts 13:10-11; 23:3; 1Cor. 16:22; Gal. 1:8-9; 5:12; 2 Tim. 4:14), but while these verses contain a curse element, they do not have a specific prayer to the Lord that the judgment would be carried out.² Imprecations from the Psalms, however, are quoted in the New Testament (Acts 1:20; Pss. 69:25; 109:8). Crucial to the definition of an imprecation is that it (a) must be an invocation--a prayer or address to God, and (b) must contain a request that one's enemies or the enemies of Yahweh be judged and justly punished.”⁶

Condemnation being called upon God’s enemies is throughout the Old Testament, and is repeated in the New Testament. An honest student must face this dilemma and not avoid such an overwhelming portion of scripture. Several explanations or justifications have been suggested.

⁶ J. Carl Lanley. A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981) 35-45 1981. Dallas Theological Seminary. p. 36.

Imprecatory Inspiration

One easy solution is to simply convince oneself that these verses are not inspired. They are the expressions of the writer's heart and do not reflect the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This view is taken by Kittel who describes the imprecatory psalms as originated in the minds of men who thought only of conquest and revenge.⁷ However, the very fact that they are presented in the Psalms negates that theory. This idea also, ignores the nature of David's character. In 2 Samuel 16:5-14 the narrative demonstrates David's patience with his enemies. In Psalm 5, the first of the imprecatory Psalms, David prays that God will judge his enemies; however, the occasion of this Psalm is David's running from his son Absalom. Scripture is clear that David did not want harm to come to Absalom. This idea contradicts Acts 4:25, which indicates that David did actually write the Psalms by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Jesus, Mark and Luke all attest to the fact that the Psalms are scripture written by David as inspired by the Holy Spirit. Mark 12:36, Acts 1:16. To deny these scriptures is to deny the inspiration of the scriptures; to ignore them is to ignore scripture. To deny scripture is to deny the One who gave the scripture, the Lord God.⁸

⁷Kittel, Rudolf, and J. Caleb Hughes. *The Scientific Study of the Old Testament: Its Principal Results, and Their Bearing Upon Religious Instruction*. London: Williams & Norgate, 1910. p. 143.

⁸ James E Adams,. *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co, 1991.

Factual Record

In similar thought, some bible students interpret these vindictive Psalms as a record of fact, like the record of David's misconduct with Bathsheba, or a correct recording of the feelings of the author.

Those unable to justify the imprecatory psalm assertions have proposed that some of the maledictions found in the Psalter can be explained as merely recording the feelings of other people, as merely stating the gratification which individuals would feel in seeing vengeance visited upon evil men, even when this vengeance would be taken in a most barbarous and savage way. According to this explanation, the only thing for which the Holy Spirit would be responsible would be the correct recording of what was felt or said.⁹

Their implication is the scripture is inspired and records a fact, but not an action that should be repeated. To their defense, that is a correct way to interpret some portions of narrative scripture. However, this seems inappropriate to the nature of the genre of the Psalms. It also, ignores the superscripts which are part of the inspired texts; for example, "For the director of music. To the tune of "Do Not Destroy." Of David. A *miktam*." This is the superscript for Psalm 58. It appears that David wrote this under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for the purpose of singing it. So that not just he, but the whole singing congregation would request God's judgment upon His enemies.

⁹ Raymond F. Surburg (Raymond Frederick). 1975. "Interpretation of the imprecatory Psalms." *Springfielder* 39, no. 3: 88-102. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed March 21, 2016).

Dispensation Incongruence

Some argue that this difficulty can be resolved by assuming the Old Testament had different spiritual requirements than the New Testament. This argument attempts to imply that it was allowable for David to hate his enemies, and that the Old Testament did not provide sufficient guidelines for dealing with enemies. Laney addresses this argument.

The Mosaic covenant did provide David with adequate guidelines for ethical conduct. Hatred for one's neighbors is forbidden in the Old Testament, as is vengeance (Deut. 32:35), while love is commanded (Lev. 19:17- 18). This solution to the problem of the imprecatory psalms is inadequate because it underestimates the Old Testament's provision of ethical guidelines.¹⁰

In Exodus 23:4-5 Israel was commanded to care for the animals of an enemy.

“If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help them with it.” - NIV

Although David may not have had access to Proverbs as they may have been collected during Solomon’s time, this famous Proverb demonstrates the Old Testament’s commands to love one’s enemies.

“If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head,
and the LORD will reward you.” – Proverbs 25:21-22

¹⁰ J. Carl Lanley. A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms. Bibliotheca Sacra 138 (1981) 35-45 1981. Dallas Theological Seminary. p. 39.

It is true that the New Testament enlightened and expounded much of the Old Testament, but it is an error to attempt to create incongruence between the Testaments.

Attempts have been made to explain away the Imprecatory Psalms as indefensible because they were supposedly the product of an ethically inferior age. Compared with the New Testament dispensation the ethics and theology of the Old Testament are held to be inferior. This position, however, ignores certain teachings of the New Testament on the punishment of sin and sinners as well as the teaching concerning a final judgment of men and nations.¹¹

In the Gospel of Matthew chapter 23, Jesus, the giver of the command to love our enemies declares “woes” or curses upon His enemies. Paul, in his first letter to the Corinthians 16:22 writes, “²²If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.” Again Paul writes in Galatians 1:8 “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.”(ESV) The word here is anathema. It is understood in both Greek and Latin to mean devoted to the devil, or condemned to Hell. There is not a more condemning curse. It is erroneous to believe that imprecations are limited to the Old Testament or to marginalize some texts. The God of the Bible is immutable and therefore not subject to change. Therefore, believers must insist in consistency between the Testaments and not to seek refuge in a false disharmony.

As the character of God does not change, so the essence of God's ethical requirements does not change. Therefore, as the imprecatory psalms were at times

¹¹ Raymond F. Surburg. (Raymond Frederick). 1975. "Interpretation of the imprecatory Psalms." *Springfielder* 39, no. 3: 97. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

appropriate on the lips of Old Testament believers, so they are at times appropriate on the lips of New Testament believers as well.¹²

Jesus Christ cursed the non-fruitful fig tree as a sign of the curse that would fall upon Israel because of its rejection of him. Disbelieving people who reject the gospel are in fact already cursed, as is suggested in John 3:16-18. The cursing of the unrepentant is continued in the New Testament and through eternity.

Imprecatory Limitations

Some have suggested that the authors of the imprecatory Psalms were voiced only against the national enemies of Ancient Israel and are not applicable to today's situation. At first this may appear to be an easy explanation. Psalm 137 for example could fall into that category. However, the imprecatory Psalms can be divided into 3 categories. There are Psalms against violators of social justice (58 and 94), and national enemies against Israel (68, 74, 79 83, 129, and 137). However, the majority appear to be against personal enemies, (5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 17, 28, 31, 35, 40, 52, 54, 55, 56, 59, 69, 70, 71, 104, 109, 139, 140, 141, and 143).¹³ Psalm 109 for example is

¹² John N. Day. 2002. "The imprecatory psalms and Christian ethics." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 634: 166-186. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed March 21, 2016).

¹³. 2006. "Broken teeth, bloody baths, and baby bashing: is there any place in the church for imprecatory Psalms?." *Concordia Journal* 32, no. 4: 368. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed March 21, 2016).

against a personal enemy of David. It has been called hateful and appalling in its retaliatory nature.¹⁴ David cried out to the Lord for terrible vengeance.

⁶Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy;
let an accuser stand at his right hand.
⁷When he is tried, let him be found guilty,
and may his prayers condemn him.
⁸May his days be few;
may another take his place of leadership.
⁹May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow.
¹⁰May his children be wandering beggars;
may they be driven^[a] from their ruined homes.
¹¹May a creditor seize all he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.
¹²May no one extend kindness to him
or take pity on his fatherless children.
¹³May his descendants be cut off, - Psalm 109: 6-13

This view is quickly dismantled and does not really address the question of how Christians should respond to these psalms in light of 2 Timothy 3:16.

This explanation, however, may take care of some passages but it does not meet the objections that can be advanced against other passages in the Psalms. The question needs to be examined whether or not it is right or permissible to utter the kind of imprecations that are found in numerous psalm passages.¹⁵

¹⁴ John N. Day. 2002. "The imprecatory psalms and Christian ethics." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 634: 176. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

¹⁵ Raymond F. Surburg. (Raymond Frederick). 1975. "Interpretation of the imprecatory Psalms." *Springfielder* 39, no. 3: 95. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

It should be noted that David beseeched the Lord to righteously vindicate him. He did not act to personally vindicate himself. The Lord God knows all the circumstances and motives of the heart of each individual and is the only true righteous judge. David called for a terrible judgment, but this is within the scope of the Abrahamic Covenant.

Verse 9, "Let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow," makes explicit appeal to talionic justice in harking back to the words of Yahweh to the Israelites in Exodus 22:22-23, "You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict him at all, and if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless" (cf. Deut. 27:19). In essence David was reminding God to be true to His promise.¹⁶

SOLUTIONS

Covenantal Considerations

The imprecatory Psalms must be accepted as inspired by the Holy Spirit, and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. One suggestion lies in the covenant made with Abraham. Genesis 12:2-3 God promises Abraham to bless him and makes a covenant to bless those who bless him and to curse those who curse him.

¹⁶ John N. Day. 2002. "The imprecatory psalms and Christian ethics." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 171. 179. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

*“I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;
I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.
³ I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.”*

When a person, nation, or group set themselves against God’s covenant with Abraham they are making themselves liable to cursing from God. “When psalmists call down curses, it is because enemies have been disloyal to Yahweh's covenant. As a consequence, the covenant breaker deserves Yahweh's covenant curses.”¹⁷ For Christians, the same promises apply.

Paul makes it clear in Galatians 3:29 that the baptized belong to Abraham's seed, [and are thus] heirs according to the promise." As heirs of Abraham through Christ we are heirs of Yahweh's promises of blessing and cursing. It should not surprise us, therefore, that the theology of imprecation appears in many places in the New Testament (cf. e.g., Acts 8:20; 13:10-11; 1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 5:12; 2 Tim. 4:14; Rev. 6:9-11; 14:19-20; 18:4-8, 20; 19:1-3,15). The classic example comes in Galatians 1:8-9 when the apostle invokes an *ἀνάθεμα* upon the enemies of the Gospel. The word *ἀνάθεμα* is lexically and theologically equivalent to the Hebrew word *OIII* which appears in Israel's holy war texts and means utter annihilation. Standing in the same tradition, Jesus also uttered prayers of imprecation upon his enemies (e.g., Matt. 11:20-24; 23:13-39; Mark 11:14).¹⁸

¹⁷ Reed Lessing. "Broken teeth, bloody baths, and baby bashing: is there any place in the church for imprecatory Psalms?." *Concordia Journal* 32, no. 4 (October 2006): 369. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

¹⁸ Reed Lessing. "Broken teeth, bloody baths, and baby bashing: is there any place in the church for imprecatory Psalms?." *Concordia Journal* 32, no. 4 (October 2006): 369. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

“To curse Abraham is to curse the God of Abraham.”¹⁹ God made a promise to Abraham, which will be fulfilled. This argument reasons that it is proper to make a request to God to fulfill his covenant.

Divine Vindications

Vengeance belongs to God alone, as He states in Deuteronomy 32:35, concerning His people and those who oppose Him,

*“It is mine to avenge; I will repay.
In due time their foot will slip;
their day of disaster is near
and their doom rushes upon them.”*

This theme is not limited to the Old Testament but is repeated in Romans 12:19

According to Chad Brand,

It is important to recall the theological principles that underlie such psalms. These include: (1) the principle that vengeance belongs to God (Deut. 32:35; Ps. 94:1) that excludes personal retaliation and necessitates appeal to God to punish the wicked (cp. Rom. 12:19); (2) the principle that God’s righteousness demands judgment on the wicked (Pss. 5:6; 11:5–6); (3) the principle that God’s covenant love for the people of God necessitates intervention on their part (Pss. 5:7; 59:10,

¹⁹ Walvoord, John F., and Roy B. Zuck. *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Wheaton, Ill: Victor Books, 1983. 47

16–17); and (4) the principle of prayer that believers trust God with all their thoughts and desires.”²⁰

John Day adds,

First, the vengeance appealed for is not personally enacted; rather God is called on to execute vengeance. Second, these appeals are based on God's covenant promises, most notable of which are these: "The one who curses you, I will curse" (Gen. 12:3), and "I will render vengeance on My adversaries, and I will repay those who hate Me" (Deut. 32:41). And since God has given these promises, His people are not wrong in petitioning Him to fulfill those promises.

Prophetic Psalms

Psalm 58 for example is written against the judges who pervert justice, but praises God for his vindication of the righteous. The Old Testament prophets had a strong message regarding social justice for the poor, the widow, the orphan and the traveler. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Ezekiel continue with David in his calls for judgment upon those who thwart justice.

These individuals are described as unjust, whereas justice should pervade (w. 1-2), and they are chronically dishonest (v. 3), ferociously violent (w. 2, 6), and stubbornly wicked and deadly (w. 3-5). Thus this psalm calls down God's vengeance not on occasional transgressors of God's laws, who harmed out of ignorance or whose abuses were casual rather than premeditated and repetitive, but on those who chronically and violently flaunted their position contrary to God's righteousness.⁷ They held positions of governing, legislative, or judicial authority, and they exploited their power for evil and their own ends.²¹

²⁰ Chad Brand et al., eds., "Imprecation, Imprecatory Psalms," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 812.

²¹ The venom of this psalm is reserved for those who, when they should be protecting the helpless under their care, instead prey on them. Jesus also used harsh language against people such as this. Speaking against the religious leaders of His day, He warned, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. . . . They devour widows' houses. . . . Such

The realization of this longed-for vengeance would vindicate and comfort the righteous who had suffered so grievously and would establish Yahweh as the manifest and supreme Judge of the earth (vv. 10-11). For with the prevalence of such societal evil, the honor of God and the survival of His faithful were at stake. The joy of the righteous at the bloody vengeance of God (v. 10) is to be understood against this background.⁹ Moreover, this expression of exultation over the destruction of the enemies of God and His people is seen throughout Scripture. It begins in the Song of Moses (Deut. 32:43), finds utterance in the Psalms (Ps. 58:10), is proclaimed in the prophets (Jer. 51:48), and climaxes in the Book of Revelation (18:20).²²

The Psalms are indeed prophetic in the sense that they pronounce God's activity and the truth of His righteousness. However, it must be noted that the songs were sung after God had already judged the offending party in most cases.

APPLICATION

The conclusion of this author agrees with various others. The imprecatory Psalms are inspired, do belong in the New Testament Church, and are rightly recited and their example followed by Christians.

men will be punished most severely" (Mark 12:38, 40, NIV). It is important to emphasize here that David himself did not seek to exact revenge; he appealed to the God of vengeance. See Roy B. Zuck, "The Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1957), 67-70, 74-75. From Day, John N. 2002. "The imprecatory psalms and Christian ethics." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 634: 170. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

²²From John N. Day 2002. "The imprecatory psalms and Christian ethics." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 171. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

John N Day, proposes “that the imprecatory psalms have a place in the New Testament church by establishing (a) that they root their theology of cursing, of crying out for God's vengeance, in the Torah—principally in the promise of divine vengeance expressed in the Song of Moses (Deut. 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); and (b) that this theology is carried largely unchanged through the Scriptures to the end of the New Testament (Rev. 15:2-4; 18:20), thus buttressing its applicability to believers today.”²³

In the face of incredible persecution and victims of terrible evil the imprecatory Psalms provide a way for the believer to call out in confidence that God is just and righteous. Just as the martyrs of Revelation call out from under the altar for vengeance, Christians call out to God for justice in the midst of suffering. As “adopted” decedents of Abraham, Christians benefit from the Abrahamic Covenant and promises of God. “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” (Galatians 6:29)

The baptized continue to be victims of violent and unthinkable acts of hatred. There are countless Christians—even in the West—who are suffering horrific atrocities. Pastors who minister to those facing sustained injustice, hardened enmity, and gross oppression must teach the baptized to pray imprecatory psalms. They are God's gift so that sufferers are able to hold fast to their human dignity while at the same time endure hardship nonviolently.²⁴

²³ John N. Day. 2002. "The imprecatory psalms and Christian ethics." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 634: 166-186. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

²⁴ Reed Lessing. "Broken teeth, bloody baths, and baby bashing: is there any place in the church for imprecatory Psalms?." *Concordia Journal* 32, no. 4 (October 2006): 369. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

These prayers for vengeance should remind Christians that they serve a God who avenges not only in the eternal realm, but in the “real world” in which they reside.

These prayers are a divinely appointed source of power for believers in their powerlessness.²⁵ In the face of sustained injustice, hardened enmity, and gross oppression, they are the Christians' hope that divine justice will indeed be realized—not only in the eschaton (2 Thess. 1:6-10) but also in "the land of the living" (Ps. 27:13). Christians should find in them a God-imbued source of strength and honor, and seek to use them, as appropriate, in their worship of God.²⁵

Suggested Purposes²⁶

1. A major purpose of the imprecatory Psalms is to establish God's righteous character. God is not indifferent, and is active in the world He created. His righteous character demands that He judge wickedness. (Psalm 7:6-11)
2. The Imprecatory Psalms bring the persecuted toward praise of God. When the people of God recite the righteousness of God, they can leave their burden at his feet, and enjoy praising the God of justice. (Psalm 7:17, 58:10)

²⁵ John N. Day. 2002. "The imprecatory psalms and Christian ethics." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 634: 186. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost* (accessed March 21, 2016).

²⁶ Adopted from J. Carl Lanley. A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms. *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981) 35-45 1981. Dallas Theological Seminary. p. 41.

3. These Psalms encourage righteous living. As the readers engage God's righteous vengeance they will be convicted of their own sin. They can see the reward of rightful living and the disaster of abandoning God's holy will. (Psalm 58:10, 69:28)
4. These Psalms remind everyone that God is sovereign and that a holy God reigns. This ensures the suffering that they do not need to take vengeance themselves, but can rely upon the Lord for their vengeance. (Psalms 59:13, 7:6, 35:1, 58:6)
5. The imprecatory Psalms encourage believers to recognize the continuity between the New and Old Testaments. These hymns remind believers that they too are covered by the Abrahamic Covenant of blessing and cursing.
6. The imprecatory Psalms should motivate believers to share the good news of the gospel, because they are reminded that the Holy Avenger judges wickedness most severely.

Final Words

Paul reconciles the New Testament command to love one's enemies with the Imprecatory Psalms in Romans 12:17-20.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written:

*“It is mine to avenge; I will repay,”[d] says the Lord. 20 On the contrary:
“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”*

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

John Day comments,

Moreover, whereas love and blessing are the characteristic ethic of believers of both testaments, cursing and calling for divine vengeance are their extreme ethic and may be voiced in extreme circumstances, against hardened, deceitful, violent, immoral, unjust sinners. Although Christians must continually seek reconciliation and practice longsuffering, forgiveness, and kindness, times come when justice must be enacted—whether from God directly or through His representatives (in particular, the state and judicial system; Rom. 13:1-4).²⁷

The Old Testament prophets declared God's great concern for justice and God's righteousness. Many of the authors described their motive of praying for the destruction of wicked men to be the protection of the righteous and fulfilling God's purpose.²⁸ Christians should join in praise to request that God bring about his judgement upon sin and wickedness. In many ways this is being requested in "The Lord's Prayer," when asking for God's kingdom to be established and for His will to be carried out on Earth just as in Heaven.

The death of Jesus on the cross paid for the transgressions and evil committed by believers to redeem them from their rightful condemnation. It is also sufficient payment for the wickedness perpetrated against believers. However, if someone sets themselves as an enemy of God and refuses to repent, then God rightfully punishes their sin. All believers must accept God's righteous and holy character as much as they find comfort in his mercy, grace and steadfast love.

²⁷ John N. Day 2002. "The imprecatory psalms and Christian ethics." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 634: 166-186. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

²⁸ Raymond F. Surburg. (Raymond Frederick). 1975. "Interpretation of the imprecatory Psalms." *Springfielder* 39, no. 3: 96. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed March 21, 2016).

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