

Cultivate: Growing in Grace through the Psalms  
Imprecatory Psalms  
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As we read through the Psalms, we inevitably come across some Psalms where the psalmist is requesting God to do bad things to people. These may be requests for justice, or for vengeance, they may be requests for protection and deliverance, and they may be prayed to God about individuals, or about national enemies.

Consider Psalm 140: 1-3, 8-11, as an example. The Psalmist says to God: ***Deliver me, O LORD, from evil men; preserve me from violent men, who plan evil things in their heart and stir up wars continually. They make their tongues sharp as a serpent's and under their lips is the venom of asps....***and then, starting in verse 8, ***Grant not, O LORD, the desires of the wicked; do not further their evil plot, or they will be exalted.***

***As for the head of those who surround me, let the mischief of their lips overwhelm them! Let burning coals fall upon them! Let them be cast into fire and into miry pits, no more to rise! Let not the slanderer be established in the land; let evil hunt down the violent man speedily!***

Psalm 10: 2, 15 is another example: ***In arrogance, the wicked hotly pursue the poor; let them be caught in the scheme they have devised....Break the arms of the wicked and the evildoer; call his wickedness to account until you find none.***

In Psalm 137 we have the Psalmist praying or singing, ***Oh daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them again the rock!***

And finally, Psalm 69: 22-28 contains similar requests. There the Psalmist prays, ***Let their own table before them become a snare; and when they are at peace, let it become a trap. Let their eyes become darkened so they cannot see and make their loins tremble continually. Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them.***

***May their camp be desolation; let no one dwell in their tents. For they persecute him whom you have struck down and they recount the pain of those you have wounded.***

***Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal from you. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous.***

Psalms such as these cause us to ask, 'What is up with this type prayer? What are Psalms like these about?'. **To many 21st century followers of Jesus Christ**, prayers for God to do bad things to people seem out of step with the 'Spirit of Christ', whose fruit is love, and contrary to He who was a friend of tax collectors and sinners. So, what IS going on in these Psalms?

I. **Psalms such as these** are classed as **Imprecatory Psalms** - and there are a number of these Psalms in the Psalter. What is an Imprecatory Psalm?

**A. Imprecatory Psalms Defined:** 'to imprecate' means to "pray evil against", or "invoke a curse against", and so these Psalm are called Imprecatory Psalms because the psalmist is praying evil against or evoking a curse on someone - and enemy, individual or national. The Psalmist is actually calling on God to avenge him or avenge Israel by bringing judgement, wrath and punishment on enemy nations or adversarial people.

**B. Imprecatory Psalms Justified:** **Some might ask here**, 'Is this ok? Why would someone like King David pray this way? And since we are in a different age - since we live since Jesus came, lived, died and rose, are these prayers relevant for us today - or did they have something to do with the OT era only? Shouldn't we be praying that everyone come to know Christ? These are fair questions.

One of the reasons many 21st century Christians struggle with Psalms such as these traces back to a common view of God, which is held by many in our day, that says A) that no one is God's enemy, and B) the 'love' side of God is all that is seen - meaning, **universal love is thought to be God's primary attribute**. But, the scriptures show us that though God is love (per 1 John 4: 7, 8, for example) God is also just, righteous, holy and true - and while he loves His covenant people with an everlasting love and that love is steadfast, God also has enemies, called 'the wicked' in

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Scripture - and these show up on the pages of history and in our world as enemies of God and of His people - or to put this another way, the friends of God's people are friends of God and those who are against his covenant people are enemies of God. We see this throughout the OT. Consider a few examples:

- 1) Genesis 3: 14-15 - seed of the serpent is seen as an enemy of woman, to be defeated by her seed;
- 2) Genesis 6 to 9 tell of the great flood, where God destroyed the whole of the human race, sparing Noah and his family. The cause of the flood is described in Genesis 6: 1-7. When the human race was totally corrupted by sin, their absolute sinfulness made them God's enemies, and he judged them accordingly.
- 3) Genesis 12: 1-3 - God will bless those who bless Abraham and will curse those who curse Abraham - meaning he, and His descendants. Thus, those who 'curse Abram' are considered enemies;
- 4) Exodus 8: 22-23 - God sees a difference between His (God's) people and Egyptians. Thus, the Israelites land is spared the judgement of the plagues, due to His covenant friendship with them;
- 5) In Genesis 15: 13-16, God told Abraham that his descendants would be strangers in a land not theirs (meaning, Egypt) for 400 years and how God would judge the nation where they served, after which they would be brought back to Abraham's land - the land of Canaan - because at the time of the promise to Abraham the 'sin of the Amorites is not yet full'. Some four hundred years later, Israel was delivered from Egypt, and eventually arrived back at Canaan. Joshua was then commanded to go into Canaan and take over the land, as it had been promised to Abraham. The book of Joshua gives account of this conquest and what we would call today, a genocide - a genocide carried out on the command of God because Canaanite civilization by this time had become so utterly wicked, that God wanted everyone destroyed. In other words, when Joshua entered Canaan with the armies of Israel, the sin of the Amorites WAS full. Looking honestly at this story, it is clear that due to sin and it's total corruption of their society, the Canaanites had become God's enemy - for sin is repulsive to Him. Thus, they became Israel's enemy too.

During the OT period, it is clear that God showed favor to His covenant people, Israel, while viewing other nations as enemies. Many other scriptures show this. Does this attitude carry over to the NT period? Consider the following:

- 6) 2 Thess. 1: 5-10 suggests that in the NT era, the same is true as in the OT period;
- 7) 2 Peter 2: 1-16 has strong words about false teachers - and the whole of the 2nd chapter shows that these are at enmity with God. They are enemies of the truth, enemies of the church and therefore enemies of God.
- 8) Jude's letter paints a similar picture. Jude verse 5-13 suggests that apostates are both depraved, and doomed, by God. Does this not suggest that these people are enemies of God?

In both the OT and NT, clearly some are God's friends, while others are God's enemies. Thus, the scriptures class people as righteous vs. wicked, as elect of God vs. non-elect, as those hardened vs. those chosen (see Romans 11: 7b). No wonder the scriptures say, 'God loves the righteous, but the way of the wicked he will bring to ruin'.

Once we understand that there are both friends and enemies of God, and that enemies of God are enemies of His people and vice versa, then we have the foundation and basis behind Imprecatory Prayers - for these prayers are actually requests of God, by His king or his people, to exact vengeance and judgement on the enemies of God's King or upon the enemies of God's people.

**C. Several Psalms are identified as Imprecatory Psalms: Psalm 5, 7, 10, 17, 35, 40, 58, 59, 69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 129, 137, 140** are all Imprecatory Psalms to a greater or lesser extent.

**II. Imprecatory Psalms Examined:** Read through the three Imprecatory Psalms below and mark the verse or verses showing this is an imprecatory psalm:

A. Psalm 5: Read this short Psalm and mark out the part of the psalm that shows this is an Imprecatory Psalm (see vs. 5, 6, 9-10)

B. Psalm 55: What part or parts of this Psalm show it is an Imprecatory Psalm? (see 9, 15, 23)

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C. Psalm 109: Find the parts of this Psalm that show it is an Imprecatory Psalm (see vs. 6-20)

**III. Imprecatory Prayers Practiced:** When it comes to practicing prayer based on Imprecatory psalms, we must keep several things in mind:

**1st**, it is important to keep in mind that though these prayers may be prayed by Jesus's followers, it is God who is judge and savior, while WE are saved by God's grace alone, meaning apart from that grace we would not be a part of God's people at all - and that attitude should keep us humble toward those who oppose us;

**2nd**, as we pray this type Psalm, there should be a gospel filter that we pray these Psalms through - because we live in a different era than the OT saints lived in; and the gospel filter should be a sincere desire to see people actually find the mercy and forgiveness of God, and be saved if at all possible, through the gospel;

**3rd**, the focus of Imprecatory Prayers was always toward enemies of God and His people or His king - never toward people who wasn't liked; and the infraction of the person, which elected the prayer, was generally really serious.

**The type situation** where a church might pray Imprecatory Psalms would be under legal or economic persecution, or even physical persecution - not so much because people are coming against us as individuals but because they are standing up against Christ and against His cause;

**4th**, praying to the Father like this is a very serious thing to do - because God is alive, and powerful, and *he does* visit vengeance on the enemies of His people. It is important to keep in mind then, that this type praying was done in extreme situations. And at least for me, to consider praying like this is sobering and serious.