

Psalm 35, 109, and 137
The Imprecatory Psalms: A Biblical Reaction to Injustice
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Introduction

This morning we are going to be considering what have been termed the “Imprecatory Psalms.” And I will warn you that the first part of this sermon will be more like a lecture than a sermon; however, if the Lord wills and if time allows, things will become extremely practical after I build for you a basic, yet accurate, understanding of what the psalms of imprecation are and entail.

Before we begin our discussion on the imprecatory psalms in specific, it will be profitable to say a few words about the book of the Psalms in general. The title of the book of Psalms in Hebrew is *Tellihim* which literally means “praises.”¹ Our English title, “Psalms,” comes from the title of some of the major Greek versions of the book of Psalms, *Psalmoi*, which literally means “song.”² Thus, the book of the Psalms is a collection of 150 praises, prayers, and songs sung unto God. As I have mentioned before,³ the greatest contribution that the Psalms make to the whole of Scripture is that they are the recording not of God’s word to man as much as man’s word to God. This should tell us something about their use: in the book of Psalms we learn how we ought and ought not approach God.

John Calvin suggested that the Psalms are “an anatomy of all parts of the soul.”⁴ In the Psalms we see men of God at the highest of heights and the lowest of lows. The Psalms are not lacking in one single human emotion. This is why many have considered the book of Psalms to be just as much a revelation of man than of God. And one of the major implications of this book is that you can go to God in any and every stage of your life, bearing what C. Hassel Bullock terms a “naked honesty.”⁵ The example set forth by the psalmists is that we are to go to God both at the apex of happiness and satisfaction and at the apex of depression and anger. What God wants from you, as is clear from the Psalms, is honesty. He does not want you to come masking yourself, your fears, your delights, or even your anger. The Psalms are an invitation to come to Christ bearing forth your heart in whatever condition it may be.

This reality is going to be ever clear as we study the imprecatory psalms (or the psalms of imprecation). More specifically, the psalms of imprecation teach us how we are to come before God with anger and a desire for justice in the face of injustice. The imprecatory psalms are just one shade in the multi-colored pallet of the Psalms. Before we actually look at some of the imprecatory psalms it would be a good idea to define what an imprecation is and how it relates to what is found in the pages of the Psalms.

Defining Imprecation

¹ C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms: A Literary and Theological Introduction*, Encountering Bible Studies (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 22.

² Ibid.

³ In a sermon I preached on August 2, 2009 in a sermon titled “The Silence of God.” See: <http://www.biblecreed.com/media/Psalm%2088.pdf>

⁴ In Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 23.

⁵ Ibid., 138.

Although I am never generally satisfied with sticking to entries given in standard, secular dictionaries while doing biblical studies (specifically), it might be helpful to just take a look at how a common dictionary defines the word “imprecation.” The Random House Webster’s College Dictionary suggests that to imprecate is “to call down evil on” or to call down a [curse] on someone or something.⁶ According to Webster’s an imprecation is the act of calling evil or a curse upon someone (or maybe even something). This actually may not be all that bad of a definition, depending upon what they mean by ‘evil’ and/or ‘curse.’ When most people they think of calling down curses, they have in their minds wiccan witches, trolls, totem polls, ouija boards, and the famous superstition revolving around the evil eye in animistic cultures. But the images of Harry Potter and/or the cursed apple from Snow White ought not be what first comes into your mind when you think of the psalms of imprecation.

In the realm of biblical studies, to imprecate carries the meaning of praying to God that His judgment fall upon the wicked. And this is what the psalms of imprecation are all about; they are prayers to God that He might overcome the enemies of the psalmist in judgment. And thus an imprecation is the act of praying that God might exact justice by completely destroying the wicked. It is vital that you get a specific understanding of these imprecatory psalms. The best way to understand these psalms is to think of them in terms of prayers as opposed to curses. Consider the following statement by Angel M. Rodriquez;

“...these imprecations are not primarily curses, but prayers—entreating God to punish the enemies of the psalmist in a particular way. It is true that at times we find what could be called a formula of cursing... but it is used as part of a prayer addressed to God.”

John Day helpfully suggests that the psalms of imprecation are “cries to the God of justice to execute his justice in the here and now on behalf of his severely oppressed or defeated people.”⁷ He concludes that these prayers of imprecation are best understood as “plea[s] for divine vengeance.”⁸

I am assuming that some of you have never even heard of the psalms of imprecation, and you are already beginning to question the validity or maybe even the morality of such prayers. You may be asking, “Hold on a second, I thought Jesus told us to love and pray for our enemies, and now you are telling me to incite God to come upon them in fierce judgment?” Just hold on to your hat! The validity and relevance of such prayers will become clear as we move along.

This morning we will be taking just a sampling from among the psalms of imprecation; we will not be looking at all of these psalms. But if you were wondering how many of these prayers can be found throughout the book of Psalms, here is a list: Psalms 35, 55, 59, 69, 79, 109, and 137.⁹ All of these Psalms are at least generally agreed upon as falling into the category of “Psalms of Imprecation.”

⁶ *Random House Webster’s College Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1990), 676.

⁷ John N. Day, “The Pillars of Imprecation” *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 19, no. 9 (2005): 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ I got this list from Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 228.

Psalm 35:1-8; Psalm 109:1-20; Psalm 137:7-9

This morning we will be looking at the following three imprecatory psalms. Before making any comments on them, I want to read them all.

(Psalm 35:1-8) 1 Oppose my opponents, LORD; fight those who fight me. 2 Take Your shields—large and small—and come to my aid. 3 Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers, and assure me: "I am your deliverance." 4 Let those who seek to kill me be disgraced and humiliated; let those who plan to harm me be turned back and ashamed. 5 Let them be like husks in the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them away. 6 Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them. 7 They hid their net for me without cause; they dug a pit for me without cause. 8 Let ruin come on him unexpectedly, and let the net that he hid ensnare him; let him fall into it—to his ruin.

(Psalm 109:1-20) 1 God of my praise, do not be silent. 2 For wicked and deceitful mouths open against me they speak against me with lying tongues. 3 They surround me with hateful words and attack me without cause. 4 In return for my love they accuse me, but I continue to pray. 5 They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my love.

6 Set a wicked person over him; let an accuser stand at his right hand. 7 When he is judged, let him be found guilty, and let his prayer be counted as sin. 8 Let his days be few; let another take over his position. 9 Let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. 10 Let his children wander as beggars, searching [for food] far from their demolished homes. 11 Let a creditor seize all he has; let strangers plunder what he has worked for. 12 Let no one show him kindness, and let no one be gracious to his fatherless children. 13 Let the line of his descendants be cut off; let their name be blotted out in the next generation. 14 Let his forefathers' guilt be remembered before the LORD, and do not let his mother's sin be blotted out. 15 Let their sins always remain before the LORD, and let Him cut off [all] memory of them from the earth.

16 For he did not think to show kindness, but pursued the wretched poor and the brokenhearted in order to put them to death. 17 He loved cursing—let it fall on him; he took no delight in blessing—let it be far from him. 18 He wore cursing like his coat—let it enter his body like water and go into his bones like oil. 19 Let it be like a robe he wraps around himself, like a belt he always wears. 20 Let this be the LORD's payment to my accusers, to those who speak evil against me.

(Psalm 137:7-9) Remember, LORD, [what] the Edomites said that day at Jerusalem: "Destroy it! Destroy it down to its foundations!" 8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who pays you back what you have done to us. 9 Happy is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks.

Four Points

I want to point out 4 different motifs which are quite evident in each of these psalms of imprecation. **First**, what are the Psalmists doing in these passages? Praying!

This is what imprecatory psalms are—they are not magical curses, they are prayers inciting God to come upon the wicked in judgment. You will see that this is the case from Psalm 35:1, 109:1, and 137:7. These are all petitions directed to God, asking Him to get involved.

Second, I want you to notice the nature of David’s enemy. In 35:4 he identifies his enemy as “those who seek to kill me,” and then we see in 35:7 that they did so without a cause. Look at the nature of the enemy in Psalm 109:16-17: the man that David is praying against in Psalm 109 seeks to exploit, violate, and ultimately annihilate the poor and needy, those whom God has called us to protect and defend the most. We also see the man (or men) in Psalm 109 are those who love cursing and hate blessing; in other words, they are those who love destruction and the shedding of blood—they delight in death as opposed to life. Look at the nature of the enemy in Psalm 137. The psalmist in 137 is praying against those who brutally destroyed the people of God. Notice what he says in verses 8-9; the psalmist (on behalf of his people, Israel) prays that God would repay these evil brutes for what they did to them, and then he identifies what the enemy did to them (the Israelites) in verse 9; they dashed their children upon the rocks. Thus, the statement, “Happy is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks,” says more about the wickedness of the enemies of Israel than it does about the desires of the Psalmist. The psalmist (on behalf of the Israelites) is merely reminding God of the evil nature of their enemy, petitioning him to do to their enemies what their enemies did to them.

In other words, the enemies of David are not just bullies on a play ground. David is not crying out for God to come down and smite someone who has just cut him off in traffic, spit on his cheeseburger, or teeped his house; these are prayers against those who are literally trying to kill, steal, and destroy. David’s enemies were pursuing him, but they were not pursuing him to give him a noogie, a swirly, or even to trash him in a dumpster; they were pursuing David to thrust a javelin in the back of his head. They wanted nothing more than to spill his blood.

What’s my point? These prayers are only to be prayed in the case of extreme injustice. You do not pray an imprecatory prayer against someone who has merely rubbed you the wrong way, committed some sort of a minor infraction against you or your family, or against someone who has ripped you off. These are prayers deserved for the worst of injustices.

The **third** thing that I want you to notice is the nature of the psalmist’s pleas. What is the basic thrust of the psalmist’s plea? Justice. The psalmist do not pray these prayers as blood thirsty men; rather they are merely praying that God repay the wicked for what they have done. This is most clearly seen in Psalm 137:8-9; “Happy is the one who pays you back what you have done to us. Happy is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks.” As said above, this reveals something more about the enemies of the psalmist than it does about the psalmist himself.

In fact, this statement is what is called a ‘synonymous parallelism.’ This sounds like quite the big phrase, but it really isn’t. The idea of parallelism is that you have two lines that say the same thing just in different ways. They are like parallel lines on a train track. The rail on the left is different from the rail on the right, and yet they are basically the same. Thus it is with a synonymous parallelism. Bullock suggests that a synonymous parallelism simply “means that the thought pattern in one line conforms to the pattern in

the successive line.”¹⁰ Actually what we find in this particular parallelism is that the second line clarifies in a more detailed way what was said in the first line. In other words when he says, “Happy is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks” he is clarifying what he meant when he said; “Happy is the one who pays you back what you have done to us.” All this prayer is, then, is a prayer that the Edomites and Babylonians get dealt with according to their own transgressions. The psalmist is praying that their punishment fits their crime. What was their crime? Dashing the children of the Israelites against the rocks. What would be a fitting punishment in light of this crime? Having their children dashed against the rocks. This is not to say that this form of punishment was being suggested or was implemented; rather, this is merely a way of communicating the idea of just punishment—punishment fitting the crime. And this is an actual historical fact. When the Babylonians ransacked Jerusalem in 586 BC (and years prior), this is how horribly they dealt with the children of the Israelites. And it is also historically true that the Edomites were right there cheering the Babylonians along, helping them deal mercilessly and inhumanely with Israel and her children.

Psalm 109 is very similar in this respect. Although 109:6-15 may sound quite troubling at first, once you consider the sort of man the psalmist is praying against, the imprecations make much more sense. The psalmist is merely praying that this wicked man be repaid according to the depth of his transgression. Some have difficulty with the psalmist’s prayers against the children and wife of the enemy. But with an understanding of how the ancient world works, such a prayer, although completely removed from us, makes sense. In the ancient world a man’s honor and good name was bound up in his posterity and in the good fortune of those he left to carry on his name. The prayers of the psalmist against the children of the enemy have nothing to do with the children themselves, it has everything to do with the enemy. All he is praying is that the honor and good name of the enemy would die with him. The psalmist does not wish evil upon his enemy’s wife or children; rather he is praying for judgment to befall the man, and the worst thing for a man is to have his honor die with him.

The *fourth* thing I want you to notice is this: notice that no where in these passages do you find the psalmists taking matters into their own hands, exacting justice in their own power. What do the psalmists do in the face of grave injustice? *These psalms of imprecation are the record of the psalmist’s quest to rest in God as their avenger.* They cry out to God, trusting that He will deal with his enemies. You must understand that the psalms of imprecation do not incite anger or violence; rather they provide the believer a way of channeling anger and the demand for justice by putting vengeance in the hands of God. I wrote a paper titled, “Freed Up For Love: The Importance of the Imprecatory Psalms.” This is what is so beautiful about the imprecatory psalms: it is that they give the offended and defiled a way to channel their anger, leaving it at the feet of Jesus trusting that He will exact justice upon the offender. This, in turn, frees the victim up from the pursuit and demands of vengeance to love. After all, what does Paul say in Romans 12:19?

*Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for His wrath. For it is written: **Vengeance belongs to Me; I will repay,** says the Lord.*

¹⁰ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 36.

The imprecatory psalms are the outworking of such a command given by the apostle Paul. You see, David had every opportunity to annihilate those who were pursuing him. Just read 1 Samuel and see how many times David spares Saul's life when he had a chance to kill both he and his men, knowing full well that Saul was the one who was seeking to kill him (see 1 Samuel 24; 26). David was freed up to love Saul even while Saul was seeking to kill him because he relieved himself of the responsibility and duty of avenging himself. He trusted that God was going to avenge him and thus he could spend his energies on love and honor as opposed to focusing on hate and revenge. Now, did David have to deal with anger? You bet he did, but he did not let his anger control him. He took his anger to God and laid it at His feet, trusting Him with the rest.

Piper on Trusting the Promise of Romans 12:19

Consider what John Piper, in his book *Future Grace* had to say about the importance of trusting God to avenge.

The issue of releasing grudges is an issue of *faith* in God's promises of future grace—the future grace of judgment on the offender. If we believe God's promise, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' then we will not belittle God with our inferior efforts to improve upon his justice. We will leave the matter with him and live in the freedom of love toward our enemy—whether the enemy repents or not.¹¹

It is when a person *doesn't* lay injustice at the feet of Jesus that he has to exact judgment on his own. It is when a person doesn't bring their anger to Jesus, channeling it through trust in the promises and character of God, that his anger begins to control him. You see, the way to deal with anger is not to pretend that it doesn't exist; it is not to suppress it. The way to deal with anger is to bring it to Christ, and let the promises of God speak to that anger. After all, why does anger arise? Because of injustice! But anger must not be suppressed; it must be brought to the Lord, laid at His feet. The only way anger can truly be dealt with is through trust. Most people try to deal with it by numbing it with some sort of emotional Novocain, covering it up with a superficial joy and happiness. But if you deal with your anger by numbing it, you will, in the process, numb your ability to experience joy and peace as well. Others try to deal with their anger by drowning it in a bottle. Anger is the emotional response to injustice.

Unfortunately, many people in this world are quick to get angry because they think themselves to be at the center of the universe, and thus they consider it an injustice when they don't get their way all the time. This sort of anger does need to be repented of.

Piper goes on to suggest that God has promised to make all, Christians and non-Christians, pay their sin debt in full. The sin debt of Christian's has been paid in full by Christ on the cross and the sin debt of unbelievers will be heaped upon them forever in hell. Either way, God's people must trust his promises of restitution. God will deal with injustice, and thus the people of God need not exact justice on their own.

Have You Prayed Imprecations?

¹¹ John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 266.

Most of those who decry the psalms of imprecation have actually prayed them on numerous occasions without even realizing it. For example, no matter their stance on the war in Iraq or Afghanistan, most Christians have prayed for justice to be exacted upon Saddam Hussein and those involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks because of their violent, God-less ways (even while praying for their conversion). How many of you in here have prayed to God that he would grant the US and her allies success in the war against terrorism and terrorists? I hear people praying for this sort of thing all the time. This, my friends, is an imprecatory prayer. By praying for success in our battle against terrorism, you are praying that God would bring the terrorists to justice. The only difference between your imprecatory prayers and the imprecatory prayers in the book of Psalms is that yours are couched in politically correct language. Let me put it this way: the only difference between your imprecatory prayers and the imprecatory prayers in the psalms is that your prayers are general (“We pray that you would grant our soldiers victory in the battle against terrorism and terrorists”) while the psalmists prayers against the unjust were specific (We pray that the blood of the terrorists would pool on the ground). The prayer is the same; the only difference is the language in which it is couched.

The burning desire for justice that springs up in the heart when a human hears of rape, spousal or child abuse, abortion, incest, or child pornography actually ought to lead Christians to the throne of grace asking God to get involved by bringing the perpetrators to justice.

Consider these words from C. S. Lewis;

“the absence of anger, especially the sort of anger which we call indignation, can, in my opinion, be a most alarming symptom.”¹²

In other words, a lack of desire for justice against those who commit unthinkable, gross injustice is an indication that something has gone awry in the moral thermometer of man. When man can witness or even hear about sick and twisted injustice (whether it be rape, incest, or any other sort of gross injustice) without a desire for restitution, the heart needs examination. Perhaps one has become so desensitized by the graphic images spewing forth from Hollywood or the internet that injustice has simply become commonplace, a reality that we just have to live with. The psalms of imprecation, thus, provide the believer a channel to deal with his/her innate, God-given demand for justice without having to take matters into their own hands.

Conclusion

I just want to end by drawing your attention to the two most important implications of the imprecatory psalms for your life. First, the imprecatory psalms give you an outlet to channel feelings of anger that may arise in your heart at the news of gross injustice. And the result of such channeling frees you up to love as Jesus loved. You can love your enemies. The imprecatory psalms do not contradict Jesus’ commands regarding love and forgiveness toward enemies, rather they make it possible without at the same time losing your innate, God-given demand for justice. Without the psalms of imprecation it would be impossible to love as Jesus loved. But since we can relieve

¹² C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 30.

ourselves of the duty of exacting justice we can spend our efforts on love as opposed to revenge. Thus, the imprecatory psalms promote peace.

We live in a world full of injustice, and thus the imprecatory psalms are just as relevant for life today than they were in the ancient world. These prayers of imprecation are not magical, they are simply the pleas of the people of God inciting God to come to their rescue or to the rescue of someone they love. The righteous trust the character of God; they trust His promises and release themselves from the burden and responsibility of exacting revenge in their own power.

Resting in God's promise regarding vengeance frees you up for love.