

LIBERTY THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

FREED UP FOR LOVE: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

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INTRODUCTION

Many Christians have found much dissatisfaction with a good number of the prayers contained within the book of the Psalms. For example, after reading Psalm 139:8-9 one may wonder if Judaism and/or Christianity doesn't have something of its own form of Islamic Jihad: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us-he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (Psalm 139:8-9). In this essay the author will discuss such passages, commonly known as the "imprecatory psalms." What will be sufficiently evident is that these prayers, rather than evidencing a Jihad-esque bent toward conversion by force, actually promote faith, dependence, Christ-likeness, and true peace. The author will also seek to show that such prayers can even be found throughout the New Testament as well.

IMPRECATORY PSALMS DEFINED

To imprecate literally means to call a curse upon a person. J. Carl Laney defines the imprecatory psalms as "an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or the enemies of God."¹ While C. Hassell Bullock sees the validity of categorizing the psalms in view as 'imprecatory psalms,' he suggests that it would be more accurate to identify them as "Psalms of anger" or "Psalms of wrath."² Angel M. Rodriquez correctly suggests that the psalms of imprecation should not be considered curses at all, but rather prayers: "these imprecations are not primarily curses, but

¹ J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," in *Vital Biblical Issues*, ed. Roy B Zuck (Grand Rapids: Kregel Resources, 1994), 30.

² C. Hassell Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 228.

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.”³ John Day, approaching the imprecatory psalms in much the same way as Rodriguez, says,

These curses are not a venting of anger or an expression of the spirit of revenge, they 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. A curse is a call for harm to befall another, but in the Psalms (as in the rest of Scripture) it is a call for harm to befall *the horrible enemies of God's people*. It is a plea for divine vengeance.⁴

Not only are scholars in disagreement as to how many of the psalms in the Psalter fall into this category of psalms, but many scholars question whether there should be such a category in the first place. For example, Rodriguez says, “since no literary type of psalm appears in the Psalter that could be called ‘imprecatory,’ it is better to say that there are imprecatory passages in some of the psalms.”⁵ Bullock, however, is much more accurate in identifying the imprecatory psalms to be an actual category with content (as opposed to form) as its primary distinguishing feature. He specifically identifies Psalms 35, 55, 59, 69, 79, 109, and 137 as falling into this category.⁶

IMPRECATORY PSALMS SURVEYED

³ Angel M. Rodriguez, “Inspiration and the Imprecatory Psalms” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 5, no. 1 (1994): 40.

⁴ John N. Day, “The Pillars of Imprecation” *Touchstone: A Journal of Mere Christianity* 19, no. 9 (2005): 33.

⁵ Rodriguez, *Inspiration and the Imprecatory Psalms*, 40.

⁶ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 228.

It will be helpful to do a survey of the high points of a few of the imprecatory psalms in order to get an idea of their contents. In this section of the paper we will do a cursory survey of Psalms 35:1, 109:9-10, and 137:9.

PSALM 35:1

First of all, Robert Davidson suggests that this psalm emphasizes courtroom terminology where the psalmist makes his case dealing with false accusations brought against him. He suggests that “the psalmist’s plea is for a verdict of not guilty with respect to the charges brought against him.”⁷ In the very first verse of Psalm 35 the foundational element to all of the imprecatory psalms is evident; a cry from the Psalmist to the Lord for help in the midst of mistreatment. This element can be found in Psalm 55:16, 22-23; 59:1, 9-10; 69:1, 13-18; 79:9; 109:20-21, 26-27, 31; 139:7. The sole concern of the psalmist is that God come to his deliverance. There is no questioning the fact that the psalmist was looking to the Lord alone for justice to be done.

Many immediately entertain suspicion when they read the psalmist praying for the humiliation, disgrace, and ultimately the ruin (vv. 4, 8) of his enemy. However, Walter Kaiser correctly suggests that “David had no spirit of vindictiveness or a desire to get even.”⁸ In essence, the prayer of the psalmist in Psalm 35 is a practical outworking of the admonition in Romans 12:19 (quoting Deuteronomy 32:35): “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,’ says the Lord.” Rather than expending his own energy on exacting justice on his enemies, the psalmist is petitioning the Lord to do to his enemies

⁷ Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 119.

⁸ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 295.

that which is in accordance with his (God's) own standard of justice. This is why mention is made in the thesis of the paper that praying the imprecatory psalms actually promotes peace between men on this earth. In effect, when people "leave room for the wrath of God" by bringing the great injustices done on this earth to the feet of Jesus, men are freed up from having to exact judgment on their own—they are freed up for love and service.

John Piper helpfully explains,

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.⁹

It is when a person *doesn't* lay injustice at the feet of Jesus that he has to exact judgment on his own.

It must be remembered that the psalmist is not here whining about getting the raw end of a deal; the trial he is going through is no mere spat on a playground. Rather, he has been the target of a series of grievous injustices. The psalmist's enemies wanted nothing less than to accuse him falsely and put him to death (vs. 4, 12, 20-21). The psalmist's enemies were men who were bent on doing nothing but evil—seeking the destruction of God's inheritance, his people. One of the primary reasons Christians have difficulty with the imprecatory psalms is because they do not understand the vile nature of those whom the psalmists are praying against.

⁹ John Piper, *The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in Future Grace* (Sisters: Intervarsity Press, 1995), 266. Piper suggests that God has promised to make all, Christians and non-Christians, pay their sin debt in full. The sin debt of Christians 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.

In fact, 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, 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). 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. In fact, although C. S. Lewis would incorrectly suggest that the psalms of imprecation are laced with sin, he does admit; “the absence of anger, especially the sort of anger which we call *indignation*, can, in my opinion, be a most alarming symptom.”¹⁰ 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.

Another central element to the imprecatory psalms can be found in vs. 27. In vs. 27 we see the psalmist’s desire for the exaltation of Yahweh: “May those who delight in my vindication shout for joy and gladness; may they always say, ‘The Lord be exalted,

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), 30.

who delights in the well-being of his servant.” Thus, Carl H. Laney is correct in asserting that this imprecatory prayer of the psalmist arises out of a zeal for Yahweh and his righteousness.¹¹ This same passion for the glory of God can be found all throughout the imprecatory psalms (e.g. 59:13; 58:11; 79:10, 13). Laney suggests that, in the psalmist’s mind, an affront against the King (King David is the one who is believed to have written this psalm) is an affront against God himself. Therefore when God vindicates the king he, in essence, vindicates himself. Laney explains,

David had great respect for the anointed king and refused to stretch forth his hand against Yahweh's anointed (1 Sam. 24:10; 26:11). To have done so would have been not only treason but also utter sacrilege and disregard for the theocratic office. When the office of king was conferred on David, he then regarded himself and everything that concerned him in light of his official relationship to God and the theocratic government. As the representative of God to the people, an attack on the king — the theocratic official — differed in no way from an attack on Yahweh! David saw attacks against him as attacks on the name of Yahweh. He thus prayed for the destruction of the wicked, not out of personal revenge, but out of his zeal for God and His kingdom.

In a similar vein, the Psalmist, in 35:24, motivates the Lord to action by declaring to him his desire to be able to praise him in the face of deliverance. This same theme can be found all throughout the imprecatory psalms (59:16-17; 35:9, 18, 28; 69:30; 79:13, 109:28, 30).

PSALM 109:9-10

Day suggests that Psalm 109, more than any other Psalm, has been “severely maligned.” He continues; “For example it has been styled ‘as unabashed a hymn of hate as was ever written.’”¹² Most commentators understand this to be an imprecation against a personal enemy. The reason why this Psalm has received so much controversy is because

¹¹ Carl H. Laney, “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” 38.

¹² John N. Day “The Imprecatory and Christian Ethics” *Biblia Sacra* 159 (April-June 2002): 176.

the Psalmist not only prays that horrid maladies plague his enemy, but that evil befall the enemy's wife and children as well. The Psalmist prays, "May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes" (109:9-10). First of all, it must be remembered that although Bullock explains away the fact that these Psalms are poetic in nature and thus tend toward hyperbolic extremes,¹³ it is vital to take into account, as Ernest C. Lucas points out, that a great deal of the imagery contained in these psalms would never be acceptable in prose and many other literary genres.¹⁴ Although this is the case, one cannot simply explain away *all* of the imprecatory passages in the name of poetic genre; however, a consideration of the genre does a lot to make the extreme nature of the psalmist's imprecations more understandable.

Could it be that the psalmist did not pray a curse on the man's family out of a desire to see his family punished? Could not the psalmist have prayed a curse on his enemy's family out of a desire to see the man himself punished? William VanGemeren helpfully explains the significance of the psalmist's prayer, "The reduction of his wife to widowhood and his children to being orphans (v.9) is a disgrace to the family name as they would be at the mercy of their fellow men."¹⁵ Thus, the psalmist's prayer specifically had everything to do with his enemy, not the enemy's family. It would be like praying, "Dear Lord, I pray that Dr. John Doe's car would break down so he cannot drive to his abortion clinic." Someone could well respond, "If Dr. John Doe loses his job

¹³ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 228.

¹⁴ Ernest C. Lucas, *A Guide to the Psalms and Wisdom Literature* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2003), 61.

¹⁵ William A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 692.

he will not be able to provide for his family.” Thus, although this prayer is directed toward Dr. John Doe it would indirectly affect his kids.

Rather than praying this way, the psalmist came right out and, in essence, prayed, “Lord, I pray that Dr. John Doe’s children would die of starvation.” In praying this he was really praying that his enemy would receive the full wages of his sin, death. The only reason the psalmist prays about the wife and children of his enemy is because their lot evidences the degree of punishment he receives. It would never be appropriate for a Christian to pray against the children of a man who performs abortions. However, like the psalmist, Christians can pray certain things against an abortion doctor that would negatively effect his children, but they should not do so out of a desire to see anything bad befall his children. Because evil men (unfortunately) have families and are responsible for their care, when a man dies his children suffer.

Richard P. Belcher Jr. helpfully points out the fact that the prayers of destruction toward the psalmist’s enemy and his family are directly tied to God’s covenantal promises. “Twice in Psalm 109 the strong covenant word *hesed* is used (vv. 21, 26) in an appeal for God to show covenant loyalty by delivering the psalmist.”¹⁶ After all, God promised Abraham, “And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse” (Gen 12:3). God promised Moses, “I will take vengeance on my adversaries and repay those who hate me” (Deut 32:41). The same sort of promise was given against even his own people, Israel, if they were not to be faithful to the covenant he had made with them (Deut 28:15-68). It must also be remembered that it was the Lord’s command to bring capital punishment not just on Achan when he stole some of spoils from Babylon

¹⁶ Richard P. Belcher Jr., *The Messiah and the Psalms* (Ross-Shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2006), 80.

after being commanded by God to not do so, but on his wife and children as well (Joshua 6:24-26). The promise of God destroying the enemies of both himself and his people were a part of the covenant from the start. Zuck helpfully explains the relationship of the psalmist's prayers with God's covenantal promises:

On the basis of the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant, David had a perfect right, as the representative of the nation, to pray that God would effect what He had promised—cursing on those who cursed or attacked Israel. David's enemies were a great threat to the well-being of Israel! The cries for judgment in the imprecatory psalms are appeals for Yahweh to carry out His judgment against those who would curse the nation—judgment in accord with the provision of the Abrahamic Covenant.¹⁷

Thus, the psalmist's prayers of imprecation are their way of pleading with God; "Oh Lord fulfill the promises you have made to our fathers!"

PSALM 137:9

Psalm 137 is an important imprecatory psalm because it contains the most abhorred passage in the entire Bible: "Happy is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks" (vs. 9). In fact, Day, in speaking of Psalm 137, suggests that "many Christians have rejected its last three verses altogether as being inappropriate for New Testament believers."¹⁸ This passage finds itself in the context of complete national ruin as the Israelites have just been completely destroyed by the Babylonians and taken off into captivity. Day explains the situation faced by the Israelites,

This communal lament is sung from the context of the Babylonian exile—an exile preceded by the horrors of ancient siege warfare... Siege warfare in the ancient Near East was frighteningly cruel; and the most brutal and all-too-common practice of conquerors was the dashing of infants against rocks in the fury and totality of war's carnage (2 Kings 8:12; 15:16).

¹⁷ Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," 37.

¹⁸ Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics," 173.

Thus there are two very important factors that must be considered when dealing with this passage. First of all, as Day suggested above, it is imperative for the interpreter to be mindful that ancient warfare was, in one sense, much more brutal than it is today. One thing that must be taken into consideration is that modern day warfare is not necessarily pure; the usage of bombs which can wipe out entire cities in a matter minutes, emitting harmful, suffocating, and infant-deforming gases into the air. Such warfare must never be seen to be better than what one might find in the Psalms. It must be remembered, however, that the psalmist was confined to the primitive understanding of warfare that he experienced in his own lifetime.

Second, the primary message of 137:9 is not necessarily a desire or passion for the destruction of infants, but rather a desire for just retribution. The fact is that the Babylonians marched into Jerusalem, and according to their form of warfare, had no mercy on the infants in the land. The psalmist's desire therefore is not to retaliate or one-up the enemy; rather his purpose in praying this imprecatory prayer was to seek God's action upon the Babylonians to do to them what they did to the Israelites. This principle of *lex talionis* is clearly seen throughout the Old Testament (Exod. 21:22-25; Lev. 24:17-22; Deut. 19:16-21). Day explains the principle behind the *lex talionis*:

Rather than serving as a sanction for personal vengeance, this Old Testament command actually protected against the excesses of revenge. Essentially it was designed to ensure justice—that the punishment would fit the crime. Thus rather than being a primitive and barbaric code, this Old Testament statute forms the basis for all civilized justice. It was a law of just recompense,¹⁹ not of private retaliation.

Moreover, not only was the *lex talionis* instituted by God Himself in Israel's law code, but also it was a law "based upon the very *nature* of God. Yahweh, although a God of love, is also a God of retribution who deals with His creature's trespasses against His holiness on the basis of His retributive justice."²² This is seen most clearly and poignantly in the necessity of the Cross. Since the nature of God does not change, the principle of

divine justice based on that nature, as encased in the *lex talionis*, must also remain constant.¹⁹

Thus, the psalmist's imprecation is nothing more than him pleading with God to make the punishment against Babylon fit their crime against Israel.

SOLUTIONS TO THE DILEMMA OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

As can be clearly deduced by the discussion above, the psalms of imprecation have caused much debate in Christian scholarship. The primary challenge which seems to plague theologians is how the psalms of imprecation can be reconciled with Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, in Matthew 5:43-44, says, "You have heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." How can Christians be commanded to pray for their enemies on the one hand and yet curse their enemies on the other? Theologians and exegetes have produced a whole host of approaches to this dilemma.²⁰ It will be beneficial to do a cursory observation of four of the primary alternative views of how the imprecatory psalms relate to Jesus' ethic.

First, some theologians, G. D. Vreeland²¹ for example, have suggested that the imprecatory psalms always were and always will be sinful. Vreeland says, "This, therefore, is my provisional resting place: imprecations were wrong in antiquity... Jesus acknowledged a higher way in his day in Matt 5:44 and following." As will be seen in the next section, this view simply cannot account for the continued use of imprecatory

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 174-75.

²⁰ While it would be beneficial to do an in depth study of the different approaches to this dilemma, the purpose of this paper, as defined in the thesis, is not to hash out the specifics of each view. Therefore, the author will only provide a cursory overview of the different views so as to provide more room to prove his own approach to the dilemma.

prayers after Christ's preaching of the Sermon on the Mount in the Scriptures. The second view seeks to reconcile the apparent contradiction by spiritualizing the battle or struggle of the psalmist. In other words, those who hold this view suppose that the psalmist is waging war, as Ephesians 6:12 says, "not against flesh and blood but against the rulers" and "spiritual forces of evil in the heavens." Although this approach would seem to ease the apparent contradiction, the enemies whom the psalmist faced in the psalms were clearly other men. This approach simply dismisses this fact.²²

Third, many suggest that the reason for the discrepancy between the Psalms and Jesus is the reality of progressive revelation. Jesus, according to this view, raised the drastically low standard of righteousness found in the Psalms to a much higher level. Robert Dabney says, "They [those who hold to this view] thereupon imagine a discrepancy, if not a contradiction between them, and adopt the mischievous conclusion that the two Testaments contain different codes of Christian ethics."²³ One passage which those who hold to this view can point to is Matt 19:8 where Jesus tells his inquirers that the only reason Moses allowed divorce was because of the hardness of their heart. However, Broadhurst correctly suggests that the key downfall of this approach is that it misunderstands the nature of progressive revelation.

The OT dispensation is not inferior to the New, at least not in a negative sense. It is not that it is... in error, while the NT, divergently, is pure truth. Gleason Archer says that progressive revelation is 'not to be thought of as a progress from error to truth, but rather as a progress from the partial to the obscure to the complete and clear.'²⁴

²¹ G. D. Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul, and David* (Xulon Press, 2008), 380.

²² Simon Mowinckel held something similar to this view with his emphasis on black magic. See Jace Broadhurst, "Should Cursing Continue?" *Africa Journal of Theology* 23, no. 1 (2004): 73-74.

²³ *Ibid.*, 21.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

Lastly, some suggest that the discrepancy is solved by considering all of the imprecatory psalms as messianic psalms. Those who hold to this position point to the fact that a good number of the imprecatory psalms are quoted by the New Testament authors as messianic promises (John 2:17; 15:25; Acts 1:20, etc). And since they are considered messianic it is suggested that they are for Jesus, and Jesus alone, to pray. However, Bullock correctly suggests that the “quotations are selective, and there seems to be no reason to think that the apostles looked at these psalms as exclusively messianic.”²⁵ This view also does not account for the fact that they are prayed by other people than Jesus in the New Testament (as will be discussed below).

PROPOSED SOLUTION TO THE DILEMMA OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

As has been argued throughout this paper, the imprecatory psalms were inspired by God and intended by him to be useful for growth in dependence, peace, and Christ-likeness in both the Old and New Covenants. The words of Christ in no way call into question the content of the imprecatory psalms (although Christ’s words may help Christian’s guard against an abuse of the imprecatory psalms). In this section it will be helpful to discuss the use of imprecations in the New Testament.

First of all, Day is correct in seeing a New Covenant continuation of the blessing allies/cursing enemies aspect of God’s covenant by considering Galatians 3. After all, in Galatians 3:16 Paul identifies the “seed of Abraham” to be Christ. He concludes the chapter by saying, “And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s descendants, heirs according to the promise.” Ronald Y. K. Fung is accurate in understanding that

²⁵ Bullock, *Encountering the Book of Psalms*, 230-31.

those who are in Christ are recipients of the same covenantal blessings given to Abraham; which, of course, includes God blessing those who bless, and cursing those who curse.²⁶ Since, as discussed above, the covenantal promises were the backbone behind the imprecatory prayers, we can pray for God to scatter those who fight against Christ, his righteousness, and his people in the same way that the psalmists did. Once again, this does not give license for Christians to pray ill will toward those who merely differ in personality or toward those who have caused minor relational or moral disruption. Rather, as with those in the Psalms, prayers of imprecation are to only be prayed in the midst of great and grievous injustice.

The most central passage in the New Testament regarding the continuation of the use of imprecatory prayers is the prayers of the martyred saints under the altar in Revelation 6:9-10:

When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?"

Day suggests that this passage holds much weight because it is not subject to the same critique as the imprecations in the Psalms.²⁷ As discussed above, many people discount the imprecations in the Psalms by suggesting that the psalmists were in sin by praying imprecations. However, the martyred saints in Revelation pray as men and women who have been rid of their sin nature. Robert L. Thomas explains, "They are, to be

²⁶ Ronald Y. K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 177-78.

²⁷ Day, "The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics," 185.

sure, not writers of inspired Scripture as the psalmist, but their condition of having moved on to their heavenly abode guarantees the absence of any selfish motives in their prayer life.”²⁸

What is interesting is that the book of Revelation, in many ways, is structured around the Lord’s answer to the imprecatory prayers of the martyrs in 6:9-10. For example, Day specifically points to Revelation 15:3 as the saints sing “the Song of Moses” as a hymn of praise to God for his judgment, 16:6 as the saints rejoice specifically in God’s destruction of those who have the blood of martyrs on their hands, and 18:20-19:3 where God judges the wicked city *on behalf* of the martyrs which then finds its climax in the praise of God because of his judgments against the wicked city.²⁹ This same theme can even be seen in 2 Thess 1:5-10 where Paul gives the saints in Thessalonica going through persecution on account of the Gospel assurance that God is going to both reward the saints for their faithfulness and deal out *eternal* retribution to those who are persecuting them.

Interestingly, Paul, in Gal 1:8-9, pronounces a curse upon the Judaizers in Galatia for preaching a false, works-based gospel. Paul uses the word “*anathema*” as a curse against these false teachers. Day suggests that “Paul’s use of the term [*anathema*] likewise refers to being brought under the divine curse—here the curse of eternal condemnation”³⁰ (Day 2002, 184). In speaking about the demand the Judaizers put on circumcision, Paul even went so far to say that he would wish that “those who are disturbing you might also get themselves castrated!” (Gal 5:12). Paul’s extreme statements did not arise out of a personal conflict; rather, the strong statements made against the Judaizers came out of a heart of concern—Paul was concerned for his beloved

²⁸ Robert L. Thomas, “The Imprecatory Psalms of the Apocalypse” *Biblio Sacra* (1969): 130.

²⁹ Day, *The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics*, 185.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 184.

church. The Judaizers were messing with the very foundation of the faith of the people he led to the Lord.

These are not the only passages which prove the continued presence of imprecations in the New Covenant economy. A study could be done on Mark 11-13 where Jesus curses the fig tree which was, more than anything, a curse against the Israelites for their obstinacy—a pictorial prophetic announcement regarding the destruction of the temple in AD 70.³¹ Another passage can be found in 2 Tim 4:14 where Paul boldly proclaims his knowledge of the Lord’s judgment against Alexander.

DELIVERANCE AND IMPRECATION: TWO SIDES OF THE SAME COIN

For some reason Christians love the imagery depicted in Psalm 18 with the Lord coming forth from on high, swooping down on the Cherubim in thunder and a great display. Christians love the imagery of God scattering the enemies of the Psalmist. One cannot help but stand up in the midst of Psalm 18 and shout out in victory in light of the great deliverance displayed.

The earth trembled and quaked, and the foundations of the mountains shook; they trembled because he was angry... He parted the heavens and came down... Out of the brightness of his presence clouds advanced, with hailstones and bolts of lightning. The Lord thundered from heaven; the voice of the Most High resounded. He shot his arrows and scattered the enemies, great bolts of lightning and routed them (Psalm 18:7-14)

One must remember, though, that the deliverance depicted in Psalm 18 is the same exact sort of deliverance described in the imprecatory psalms. The only difference between these two types of psalms is the angle from which the psalmist is viewing the deliverance. In Psalm 18 the psalmist is viewing his deliverance by focusing on the

³¹ See *Ibid.*, 183-84.

transcendent glory and majesty of God, while the psalmists in the imprecatory psalms focus on the actual specifics of how the Lord brings the psalmist's deliverance about. Deliverance always involves two things: a rescue of the righteous and a beating of the wicked.

The Lord is pictured in Isaiah 63 as a warrior-king who has just come from Edom, one of Israel's national enemies, with his garments splattered with their blood to announce to Israel his defeat of their enemies. This was meant to be an encouragement to them. John Oswalt brilliantly illustrates this passage by likening Yahweh to a World War II "blood-spattered, smoke-begrimed GI" who breaks into a concentration camp to set the prisoners free. He asks, "Does he look distasteful to those prisoners?"³² The obvious answer is, "Of course not, for he has come to bring about deliverance on behalf of his people." The enemy's blood splattered on Yahweh's garments is a confirmation to the Israelites that they are safe from those who once sought their lives. The same sort of imagery can even be found in the New Testament. In Revelation 19:13 Christ is said to be "clothed with a robe dipped in blood"—the blood of his enemies—and in 19:15 Christ is pictured as treading the "winepress of the fierce wrath of God." Without this all-important event in the history of redemption there would be no such thing as a heaven devoid of rebels and their destructive ways. Thus, whenever one prays for any sort of deliverance, he is indirectly praying a curse upon those who are making the deliverance a necessity.

CONCLUSION

³² John Oswalt, *Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 661-62.

The vengeance of God upon the enemies of his people is an absolute necessity. Without it there would be no salvation. For Christians to misunderstand the ultra-importance of this aspect of salvation and thus opt out of praying for God to scatter his enemies in power and righteousness produces a fluffy, non-realistic faith—a faith which believes that redemption is free. The imprecatory psalms should never provide a Christian license to harbor bitterness or rage. In fact, these prayers must be prayed from a heart that has been shaped by the heart of God—a heart which despises wickedness, and yet desires mercy and not judgment (Ex 34:6-7). The imprecatory psalms lay forth a model of how to let go of bitterness and rage not by acting like those feelings do not exist, but by recognizing them, voicing them, and then laying them at the feet of Jesus, pleading with him to establish justice by acting according to his perfect character. When a believer does such a thing, he frees himself up from the bondage of thinking that exacting justice is his duty. It frees him up to love as Jesus loved.

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