What Should We Think About the Imprecatory Psalms?

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Imprecatory psalms (e.g., Pss 5, 10, 17, 35, 58, 59, 69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 129, 137, 140) are those psalms which call upon God to destroy the enemies of God. They come from the anguished hearts of persecuted Israelites, and they include some of the most shocking words in the Bible. Take just a few examples.

Psalm 35 provides one of the most acceptable imprecatory Psalms. Verses 4–6 read,

Let them be put to shame and dishonor
who seek after my life!
Let them be turned back and disappointed
who devise evil against me!
Let them be like chaff before the wind,
with the angel of the LORD driving them away!
Let their way be dark and slippery,
with the angel of the LORD pursuing them!
(Psalm 35:4–6)

In Psalm 109, the language gets more severe as David calls for the personal ruination of the wicked.

Appoint a wicked man against him;
let an accuser stand at his right hand.
When he is tried, let him come forth guilty;
let his prayer be counted as sin!
May his days be few;
may another take his office!
May his children be fatherless
and his wife a widow!
May his children wander about and beg,
seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit!
May the creditor seize all that he has;
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil!
Let there be none to extend kindness to him,
nor any to pity his fatherless children!
May his posterity be cut off;
may his name be blotted out in the second generation!
May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD,
and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out!
Let them be before the LORD continually,

that he may cut off the memory of them from the earth!
(Psalm 109:6–15)

Finally, in Psalm 137 David pronounces a benediction on those who destroy the children of the wicked:

Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem,
how they said, "Lay it bare, lay it bare,
down to its foundations!"
O 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 against the rock!
(Psalm 137:7–9)

Due to their graphic violence and divine approval—they are in the Bible after all—many Protestant liberals have charged the God of Israel with violence unbecoming a deity. Other modern readers have written off Christianity entirely because of the imprecatory Psalms and Israel's violent history. Even for gospel-loving, grace-proclaiming Christians, the inspired cries for vengeance make us feel uncomfortable. They don't immediately fit our normal grid for a God who is love. What, therefore, should we think about the imprecatory Psalms?

A few years ago, my PhD Supervisor and good fried, Stephen Wellum, gave a Sunday School lesson on these psalms, and what follows is an amplified outline of his lesson.

A Christ-Centered Interpretation

Three primary responses have been given to understanding imprecatory Psalms. Some have attempted to dismiss them as vengeful cries from a primitive people. Of course, in making this assertion, they disregard Scripture's inspiration and authority, not to mention the way they elevate themselves over God's Word. Such a view dismisses the problem of the imprecatory Psalms, but it creates a larger problem by also dismissing the God of the Bible.

A second approach says that Jesus' command to love your enemies trumps these antiquated imprecations. While acknowledging the place of these psalms in history, they render them outdated and obsolete. Again this approach solves the problem by creating a bigger one—it fails to understand the unity of the Bible (John 10:35) and the character of God which is both gracious and just (Exodus 34:6–7), full of kindness and severity (Romans 11:22).

A third reading understands these Psalms in the light of Christ. As we put David's psalms into the mouth of our Lord, we begin to understand his pleas from the cross. On this side of the cross, we can read these psalms fearfully as we consider the eschatological retribution that will be poured out on Christ's aggressors, who refuse to trust in his atonement. Likewise, we can pray to Jesus who rules over all flesh to do what is right in salvation and judgment. This reading upholds the Bible as good and true, but it still needs further elaboration.

A Biblical-Historical Context

To understand these psalms it is necessary to put them into their historical and theological context. Since the uprising in the garden, all creation has been sentenced to receive God's judgment (Gen. 3:14–19). Creation groans because of humanity's rebellion (Rom. 8:19–22). Appropriately, the imprecatory psalms excoriate persons, nations, and societies that wage war against God and his people.

In short, the imprecatory psalms call for and announce God's coming judgment. They carry forward the promise of Genesis 3:15: "a seed of the woman will crush the head of the seed of the serpent." This promise is embedded in the context of cosmic conflict and it sets the stage for all of church history: namely, that the serpent's offspring will rage against the children of God (cf. Psalm 2), but in the end God will rescue his people. We must see the imprecatory psalms in light of this spiritual warfare.

In the fullness of time, this serpent-crushing seed of the women is none other than Jesus Christ. Sent to save his people and destroy the devil (1 John 3:8), Jesus is hoisted on a cross to effect salvation and judgment. Amazingly, the cross becomes his moment of triumph, one foreshadowed by not a few imprecatory psalms.

More personally, Jesus himself endured the imprecatory wrath reserved for God's enemies, but he did this not for his sins but for those whom he came to save. In light of this, the destruction of the Babylonian children in Psalm 137 must be seen as both the sort of wrath that Jesus himself endured as he died to reconcile his enemies to God (Romans 5:10), but at the same time, the imagery depicts the defeat of Satan and his children—those men and women who despite God's mercies refuse to trust in the gospel (cf. Rev 17–18). Indeed, the imprecatory Psalms give expression to the kind of wrath that Christ endured on Calvary and the kind of wrath he will in time pour out when he judges the nations (see Rev. 19:11–16).

Modern sensitivities may militate against such violent language, but the biblical notion of peace comes at the price of blood. Ephesians 2 goes so far as to say that Christ made peace in his body, when it was torn asunder on Calvary (vv. 14–16). The imprecatory psalms, likewise, are cries to a righteous God to mete out his justice. In the Old Testament, this was accomplished through military conflict at the hands of David and his sons, but now in the fullness of time, justice was and will be accomplished, respectively, through Christ's cross and his coming cosmic victory. (For more on how the cross relates to penal substitution and *Christus Victor*, see my 'The Cross in Colossians').

Practical Applications

Today, as we read these challenging Psalms we are confronted to ask ourselves, "What Spirit shall we obey?" The spirit of this age tells us to dismiss these hard sayings as archaic folly, but the Spirit of Christ points us to the cross and to the end of the age when Jesus will once and for all put all things under his feet. While the imprecatory Psalms may seem odd to assimilate into our Christian faith, it must be remembered that our Christian faith needs to conform to them as God's word more than we need to bend them to our perception of God.

While not always immediately understood, these psalms have many practical applications. Consider just four.

First, these psalms call us to renounce our man-centeredness and embrace God's vision of the world.

They remind us that the world does not revolve around us, but around the Son of David who is the Eternal Son of God. He has every right to strike down those who oppose him, and these psalms are ultimately his.

Second, they move us to exalt God for his justice and for his justification.

By nature we are unbalanced people, and in our age of tolerance and moral laxity, these psalms remind us of God's hatred towards sin. He hates all evildoers and abhors all liars, says Psalm 10:5–6. While discomforting, these Psalms remind us that God is holy and will not treat lightly our sin. At the same time, they set the necessary backdrop for the cross and God's magnificent love. As it has often been quipped, we cannot know the goodness of the 'good news' until we know the depths of the bad news. The imprecatory Psalms help us to see a God who is "jealous and avenging" (Nahum 1:2), even as he is gracious and compassionate (Exodus 34:6).

Third, these Psalms must be aimed at sin, while mercy is aimed at sinners.

Standing under the covenant inaugurated by Christ, we must read the imprecatory Psalms in conjunction with Jesus' teaching about retaliation and loving enemies (Matthew 5:38–47). While Jesus's teaching fulfill the Law and the Prophets, and do not excise any word of the biblical canon, they do teach us how the new covenant changes the key of these cries for justice. Under the old covenant, the theocratic kingdom of David rightly called for God's judgment upon the enemy nations around Israel. However, in the new covenant, where Christ is gathering people from every enemy nation, the tenor of our prayers should be mercy.

Jesus, and later Stephen, prayed for those who persecuted them (Luke 23:45; Acts 7:60). Likewise, Paul suffered all things for the sake of the elect (2 Timothy 2:9–10). And in Revelation 2:8–11, Jesus calls the church of Smyrna to faithful endurance. He does not suggest to them to call down fiery judgment on their persecutors. Rather, he encourages them to remember the "crown of life" they will receive after their suffering is complete (v. 10; cf. 2 Timothy 2:11–13). Likewise, in his earthly ministry Jesus rebuked his disciples for that very instinct (see Luke 9:54–55). Indeed, from these examples, we have a model that the blessedness of the new covenant believer is not the absence of persecution, but the presence of Christ's spirit (cf. Matthew 5:10–12).

In this way, I suggest we employ imprecatory Psalms cautiously, directing them more at sin, systems of sin, and the powers and principalities that lead the world into sin (Ephesians 6:12). As to sinners themselves, we have every reason to pray for their salvation and for God's mercy to keep them from sin—even if that preservation does not lead to salvation (Genesis 20:6; cf. Proverbs 21:1; 1 Tim 2:1–4). All in all, the imprecatory Psalms should be prayed by the Christian, but we should appropriate them through the finished work of Christ and the call to pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44).

Last, praying these Psalms prepares us for Christ's return.

Since, by nature we are objects of wrath, these Psalms remind us of our need for Christ's cross, but because we have been made alive in him, they also beckons us to look forward to the day when he will eradicate all evil. By taking them seriously (and not dulling their edges) God instills in his children a greater longing for a world devoid of sin. For such to happen though, the elect of God must die and be raised to new life, and Christ must return to earth and put all evil under his feet. Though these psalms are graphic, they directly forecast what Christ will do when he comes on the Last Day. And while we grieve over the lostness of

our loved ones and labor to share the gospel with them, we can and must say with Paul, "Marantha! Come Lord Jesus!" Born again to a living hope and given the Holy Spirit, we long for a New Creation, and these Psalms give us words to express that desire.

Therefore, let us sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, even those songs that call for the destruction of our enemies—the enemies of God and his Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds