

The Imprecatory Psalms (Part 1)

- Recap of the Varied Uses of the Psalms
 - A Mirror to the Soul
 - Relationship
 - Praying the Psalms
 - Imprecatory Psalms
 - Worship
 - Incarnation: Seeing the Psalms

The Imprecatory Psalms

Psalms 7, 35, 58, 59, 83, 109, 137, and 139

Imprecation, in its most basic sense is simply a spoken curse.

- If blessing consists of a wish for someone to receive the things considered good in life: land, children, food, clothing, shelter, surplus, etc., then imprecation is the wish that someone be completely deprived of these same things.

The Problem

- It is, perhaps, the most controversial and disturbing language of Scripture, drawing the most intense critiques from those critical of Scripture.

1. It seems grossly out of place to both skeptics and Christians

- C.S. Lewis in his classic book, *Reflection on the Psalms* describes his initial exposure to the imprecatory psalms as a *“spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face like the heat from a furnace mouth...”*
 - **“Break the teeth in their mouth O God!” (Psalm 58:6)**
 - **“The righteous will be glad when...they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked” (Psalm 58:10).**
 - **“Blessed is he...who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks” (Psalm 137:8-90).**
- How do these texts exist in the same spiritual tradition as
 - **“love your enemies” (Matthew 5:44);**
 - **“turn the cheek” (Luke 6:29);**
 - **“walk the extra mile” (Matthew 5:41);**
 - **“bless, do not curse” (Romans 12:14)?**

- It's not that human beings aren't capable of such hateful sentiments, but that such savage thoughts could be written down and incorporated into Israel's hymn book is, to say the least, troubling.

"Perhaps there is no part of the Bible that gives more perplexity and pain to its readers than this; perhaps nothing that constitutes a more plausible rejection to the belief that the psalms are the production of inspired men that the spirit of revenge which they sometimes seem to breathe and the spirit of cherished malice and implacableness with the writers seem to manifest."

Albert Barnes

Critical, Explanatory, and Practical on the Book of Psalms

- In trying to navigate this problem, Lewis warns *"I feel sure we must not either try to explain them away or to yield for moment to the idea that, because they are in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good or pious."*

2. "Explaining Away" the Cursing Psalms with Inadequate Explanations

Still, great damage has been done by well-meaning scholars attempting to defend these passages – "explaining them away" as if covering for an embarrassing mistake, and giving inadequate and incorrect explanations instead of accepting their authentic, unique, and appropriate contribution to Scripture.

- **The Imprecatory Psalmist Lacked the Superior Illumination Available Only Later Through Christ**

- While this may at first seem reasonable, a simple reading of the Mosaic Law and Writings of the Hebrew Canon show that people of God had full access to spiritual guidance in these matters. Consider the following:
 - "Thou shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart...nor bear any grudge...you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:17-18).
 - "Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not be glad in your heart when he stumbles; or the Lord will see it and be displease..." (Prov. 24:17-18).
 - "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat...and the Lord will reward you" (Prov. 25:21-22).
- So, to suggest that the Psalmist was unaware of divine denouncement of brutal hatred, bitterness, and maliciousness is unfounded.

- **The Imprecatory Psalms are Prophetic in Nature**

This view was interestingly held by Barnes, Spurgeon, Calvin, and many others. It suggests that the Psalmist is simply predicting in graphic terms the brutal retribution and ruin that awaits the impenitent sinner and enemies of God and His people.

- The problem with this view, however, is that it misses much of the personal stake and desire the Psalmist exhibits in cursing his enemy. The curse is not just a statement of what will happen – but rather the wish and prayer that it will happen.

- **Psalm 137:8-9**

O Babylon, you will be destroyed.

Happy is the one who pays you back
for what you have done to us.

Happy is the one who takes your babies
and smashes them against the rocks!

- Furthermore, how is the reader to tell the difference of the psalmist praying, or offering prophetic judgment – and where is the fulfillment? This view leaves the door open to significant subjectivity and dangerous interpretations.

- **The Imprecatory Psalms Represent the Humanity of the Psalmist**

This view suggests that the barbaric language of the imprecatory psalms is meant to simply put on display the fallen nature of humanity. Lewis suggested that such “hatred undisguised” could be the intent of these psalms to turn one’s attention to the ugliness inside himself.

- While this explanation does have some applicable merit, it is considered by some to deny the divine authorship in an arbitrary attempt to distinguish between what is human expression and what is of the Spirit. Some suggest it denies the unity of the divine and human authorship (Acts 4:25)

Next Week (Part 2) of the Imprecatory Psalms

- The legitimacy of the Imprecatory Psalms is found in their connection to both the character of God and the Abrahamic covenant, and can be better understood and affirmed through:

- 1. A Better Cultural and Ethical Understanding of the Psalmist’s Perspective**

- 2. Jesus’ and New Testament Writer’s Affirmation of Their Inspiration and Validity**

- 3. The Spiritual and Therapeutic Value They Offer for those Victimized by the Devastating Power of Evil in the World.**