

The Imprecatory Psalms

Introduction

“The imprecatory prayers and prayers for vengeance in the OT are often discussed in terms of the **apparent antithesis that exists between them and the NT commands to love rather than curse one’s enemies** (Matt 5:39, 44; Luke 23:34; Rom 12:14; 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Thess 5:15); this theological problem is particularly **striking when the curses of the NT are brought into the picture** (Matt 21:18–21; 25:41; Acts 8:20; 13:10–11; Gal 1:8–9; 1 Cor 16:22; Rev 6:10; 22:18–19).”

Principles: Lead with Blessing

*Give heed to me, O Lord, and listen to what my adversaries say! 20 **Is evil a recompense for good? Yet they have dug a pit for my life. Remember how I stood before you to speak good for them, to turn away your wrath from them. 21 Therefore give their children over to famine; hurl them out to the power of the sword, let their wives become childless and widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence, their youths be slain by the sword in battle. 22 May a cry be heard from their houses, when you bring the marauder suddenly upon them! For they have dug a pit to catch me, and laid snares for my feet. 23 Yet you, O Lord, know all their plotting to kill me. Do not forgive their iniquity, do not blot out their sin from your sight. Let them be tripped up before you; deal with them while you are angry** [NRSV, Jer 18.9ff]*

“The confession itself is almost entirely a prayer for judgment on his enemies. The good which he has done them (20) is to have told the truth and **prayed for them**. The central part of the prayer (21–22) might be read as **Jeremiah’s resignation: this is what they have chosen; now it must come, awful though it be**. If the motive in v 23 is blameworthy, the sentiment is still in line with God’s declared purpose and with the prohibition of the prophet’s prayer for the people. [NBC]

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“In fact, in some of these very psalms where he prays for God to vindicate his own honor and name, **David protests that he has kind thoughts toward these same evildoers**. Thus in Psalm 35:12–14 David mourns, “They repay me evil for good and leave my soul forlorn. **Yet when they were ill, I put on sackcloth and humbled myself with fasting**. When my prayers returned to me unanswered, I went about mourning as though for my friend or brother. I bowed my head in grief as though weeping for my mother.” [HSOB]

Principles: Be willing to ‘imprecate’ yourself—this is about evil, not favoritism!

3 O Lord my God, if I have done this, if there is wrong in my hands, 4 if I have repaid my ally with harm or plundered my foe without cause, 5 then let the enemy pursue and overtake me, trample my life to the ground, and lay my soul in the dust. [NRSV, Ps 7.3]

“So **David invoked death by his enemy’s hand** if he were guilty as they charged [BKC]

“If **he** had done such things, the psalmist swears, **then let certain terrible things happen to him** (v 6); the words are addressed to God and in effect cancel the earlier prayer for deliverance, only if the psalmist is indeed guilty of the charges against him. The first penalty which the psalmist invites, in the case of his guilt, is the very thing that he feared and that prompted his prayer in the first instance, namely that he be both pursued and overtaken. The consequence of being overtaken is spelled out in v 6b–c; in effect, it is death. For his “life” to be trampled onto the earth and his “glory” to be set down in the dust, implies not only the destruction of his body, but indicates poetically the departure for Sheol, or the nether-world. The psalmist’s glory was not merely his personal honor, but his capacity to praise and worship God; if he were guilty, that capacity would go, along with life itself. . . The solemn oath sworn by the psalmist, and the accusations laid against him, invite arbitration and a judgment concerning innocence and guilt, so that now the psalmist’s prayer turns to a petition for the establishment of a court of judgment (vv 7–11). [WBC]

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Principles: Most of the time it is about a *legitimate means (judgment) to a legitimate relief!*

*“Lord, you know how I suffer. Take thought of me and care for me. Pay back for me those who have been persecuting me. **Don’t be so patient with them that you let them kill me.** Be mindful of how I have put up with their insults for your sake.* [NET bible, Jer 15.15]

“God had promised ultimately to deliver and vindicate Jeremiah (v. 11); but in light of the coming calamity (vv. 12-14) Jeremiah **asked for a speedy settling of accounts.** He wanted God to avenge him on his persecutors. Though God was long-suffering, Jeremiah hoped for swift justice; **he wanted to be vindicated before God would take him away in death.** [BKC]

“The second of this pair of laments begins with a cry for revenge on the enemies (so Rudolph, McKane). The cry for revenge begins with a familiar phrase from a protestation of innocence, “O Lord, thou knowest” (cf. 12:3). The enigmatic third colon, “In your forbearance do not take me away,” probably means **“Do not be so patient with my enemies, that they have time to destroy me”** (so Bright). [WBC]

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20 *“See, O LORD, how distressed I am! I am in torment within, and in my heart I am disturbed, for I have been most rebellious. Outside, the sword bereaves; inside, there is only death. 21 “People have heard my groaning, but there is no one to comfort me. All my enemies have heard of my distress; **they rejoice at what you have done. May you bring the day you have announced so they may become like me.** 22 “Let all their wickedness come before you; **deal with them as you have dealt with me because of all my sins.** My groans are many and my heart is faint [NIV, Lam 1.20ff]*

“The last verses admit that the Lord was right in his judgment (18), yet turn quickly to an appeal to him because the city’s wretchedness was so severe (20). There was disillusionment too with the falseness of other nations as friends and a source of help (19). There is terrible recognition of the truth of sin and punishment here and of the reality of the power of God alone. Again, there was no-one to comfort. Only God, and no mere ally, could do this—and it was not yet time for him to do so. The poem ends with a plea **that Judah should not endure God’s wrath alone, but that her enemies too should be brought to account in the day of his wrath** (21; cf. v 12).” [New Bible Commentary]

Principles: Also, sometimes it is for demonstrating to the world that “crime doesn’t pay”.

*Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Thy name; And deliver us, and forgive our sins, for Thy name’s sake. 10 **Why should the nations say, “Where is their God?” Let there be known among the nations in our sight, Vengeance for the blood of Thy servants, which has been shed.** 11 Let the groaning of the prisoner come before Thee; According to the greatness of Thy power preserve those who are doomed to die. 12 **And return to our neighbors sevenfold into their bosom the reproach with which they have reproached Thee, O Lord.** 13 So we Thy people and the sheep of Thy pasture will **give thanks to Thee forever; To all generations we will tell of Thy praise.** [NAS, Ps 79.9]*

“5–7 must **not** be understood to reflect a perplexed or resentful spirit complaining of unfairness. In all the adversities of life, whether occasioned by divine wrath or part of the inexplicable but sovereign workings of his providence, our first reaction must be to bow in acceptance, as 5 implies. But may we not also pray for the **overthrow of those who savagely use us for their own profit and leave our treasured possessions in ruin** (7)? Part of the positive side of ‘leaving vengeance to the Lord’ (Pr. 20:22; Rom. 12:19) is the prayer that seeks the **overthrow of every power that continues to mistreat the Lord’s people.** [NBC]

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... In the OT, imprecatory prayers typically arise in situations in **which the wicked appear to prosper while the righteous are victimized; in this apparent discrepancy between injustice and justice, the honor, majesty, and truth of God are in question,** so that “the imprecatory prayer is a call for the breakthrough of God’s kingdom in liberation and vengeance. [WBC, Rev 6]

Principles: This ‘reap what you sow’ is also expressed in the Abrahamic Covenant, as God’s job.

*Hear, O our God, how we are despised! **Return their reproach on their own heads** and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. **Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before Thee, for they have demoralized the builders.** [NAS, Neh 4.4]*

“Like some of the imprecatory prayers in which the psalmists invoked God’s condemnation on His enemies, Nehemiah’s prayer in this instance was severe and condemning. He prayed that Sanballat and his cohorts would be taken captive and that they would be judged for their sins...How should a Christian interpret this kind of praying, especially in view of what Jesus Christ said about praying for one’s enemies? (Matt. 5:44; cf. Rom. 12:14, 20) Several facts need to be noted. First, in opposing the Jews, Sanballat ”and company“ were actually opposing God. Second, **God had already pronounced judgment on Israel’s enemies. Nehemiah was praying according to God’s will**—that God would deliver Jerusalem from her enemies (Josh. 1:5). Third, Nehemiah was praying **that God would bring about what He had promised Abraham regarding those who curse His people** (Gen. 12:3). Fourth, vengeance belongs to God, not to Nehemiah or other believers (cf. Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19. [BKC]

“The language and sentiment are somewhat stereotyped, but it is noteworthy nonetheless **that a man of action such as Nehemiah should reply to such an incitement by resorting to prayer**—“Hear, O our God!”—**rather than to direct action**. By characterizing himself and his fellows as “an object of contempt” (הזוּב), he is not only recalling the initial motivation for his mission (cf. 1:3), but is also using a word that is calculated to secure divine response: “he who carries out a bazah against one chosen by Yahweh is himself condemned to insignificance” (M. Görg, TDOT 2, 63). Since God cannot be despised with impunity (the word is often used for offense against his express will), neither, by extension, can his representatives. His honor is at stake in the present confrontation... This thought is then made explicit in the remainder of the verse: **let them suffer what they prescribe for others!** And more—may they in fact endure the penalty from which the Jews have only so recently found relief. The whole prayer is reminiscent of such Psalms as 44, 74, and 79, and in particular of the situation which Hezekiah faced when threatened by Sennacherib; cf. his prayer in 2 Kgs 19:14–19. 37 (5) Nehemiah now makes his own the imprecatory prayer of Jer 18:23. [WBC]

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“The psalmists and others who utter prayers for vengeance are not cursing others **but pray that God will act justly**.... [WBC, Rev 6]

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The Purposes of the Imprecations

An awareness of the ethical and revelational purposes of the imprecatory judgments will enable one to understand better the imprecatory psalms. Six purposes are evident.

1. One major purpose of the judgments against evildoers is to establish the righteous. As God judges the wicked, He is also invoked to establish the righteous (Ps 7:8–9). A concern for righteousness and the righteous is foundational to the imprecation found in Psalm 7:6–11.
2. A second purpose of the imprecatory judgments is that God may be praised when the psalmist is delivered (Pss 7:17 ; 35:18, 28). Closely related to this is the anticipation of rejoicing when the psalmist sees the vindication taking place (58:10).
3. A third purpose in requesting judgment against the wicked is that men will see the reward of the righteous and recognize that it is God who judges the earth (58:11). Both the righteous and the wicked will know that God is concerned with justice and that He executes judgment on the earth.
4. The imprecatory judgments are also designed to demonstrate to everyone that God is sovereign. David prayed that his enemies would be destroyed so that men from the ends of the earth may know that God rules in Jacob (59:13).

5. A fifth purpose of the imprecatory judgments is to prevent the wicked from enjoying the same blessings as the righteous. David prays that those who persist in wickedness may be blotted out of the book of life (the register of the living), that is, may be judged by physical death (69:28).

6. A sixth purpose of the imprecatory judgments is to cause the wicked to seek the Lord. Asaph prays that God would judge and humiliate His enemies so that they would seek His name and acknowledge Him as the sovereign God (83:16–18).

These purposes of the imprecations give a divine perspective to the seemingly human cries for judgment. It would appear that the high ethical and revelational purposes of the imprecatory psalms clear them of the charge of being sourced in the bitter spirit of a bloodthirsty, carnal man. [BibSac—V138 #549—Jan 81—35 // “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms” — J. Carl Laney]