

What Do I Do with Imprecatory Psalms?

Christians often feel jarred when reading psalms in which the psalmist calls down curses upon his enemies. Lines such as “Have mercy on me, O God” and “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want” roll easily off the tongue, but believers understandably falter when, praying through Psalm 3, they stumble across “Save me, O God! ... [Y]ou break the teeth of the wicked.” How should Christians think about these things? The following considerations are not meant to answer the question exhaustively, but rather to offer some theological scaffolding as Christians seek to honor the Lord in this particular regard.

I. Covenantal Considerations: Abraham, Moses, David

Imprecatory psalms—those in which the psalmist curses his enemies—are rooted in God’s covenant with Abraham. God told Abraham, “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse” (Gen 12:3). We often focus exclusively on the first half of this promise and ignore the second. God promised *both*. Those who dishonor Abraham’s offspring will be cursed. The imprecatory psalms are cries to the God of Abraham for him to make good on his promise.

This judgment against the enemies of God’s people is given extreme expression in the time of Moses and Joshua. Here, judgment comes in the form of military conquest and annihilation on a national scale. With the covenant made at Mount Sinai (Ex 19-24), the children of Abraham went from being merely a family (Abraham and his offspring) to a nation (Israel). God drowned their oppressors, the nation of Egypt, in the waters of the Red Sea (Ex 14-15). After their wilderness wanderings, Israel went on to destroy the nations of Canaan. Far from being sinful, this holy warfare was commanded by God (Num 33:50-56). It was a sort of picture of God’s judgment of the world. Here, God’s end-time wrath against sinful humanity intruded in a significant temporal and national way.

This principle of God’s end-time judgment intruding into space and time extended throughout the period of Moses and Joshua into the period of the Davidic kings. As David and Solomon defeated their enemies and expanded the borders of Israel (2 Sam 7:1; 1 Kgs 5:4), it was a geo-political expression of the expansion of God’s kingdom over-against his enemies. God called David his son, the king set on his holy hill (Ps 2). To attack the Davidic king meant to attack the LORD, and to kiss the son meant to come under the blessing of God. Thus, for the king to call upon God to judge his enemies is an extension of the promise that God made to Abraham. Far from being an outburst of self-centered vindictiveness, the imprecatory psalms call for God to establish his kingdom through his anointed king.

II. Theological Principles: Conflict, Salvation and Judgment

Ever since Adam and Eve at the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden, there has been conflict between God’s people and God’s enemies. After they take of the fruit and eat, God appears on the scene as a righteous judge. As judge, God curses the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel” (Gen 3:15). As lawbreakers, all of humanity has fallen captive deserves the

wrath of God. Yet God in his mercy chooses to have mercy on some. But notice how he does this: through conflict. He puts enmity between the serpent's offspring and the woman's offspring, so that the story of redemption is a story of conflict. Reconciliation with God means enmity with those who hate God. Coming into the light means leaving the darkness; what fellowship has light with darkness? Jesus warned his disciples, "If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (Jn 15:19). The warfare between God's people and God's enemies may be seen perhaps most clearly in Revelation. There, John describes a battle: Satan and the nations whom he has deceived come marching against the saints of God (20:7-10). Understood in this light, the imprecatory psalms are a battle cry of faith.

This theme of conflict running throughout the Bible means that in order for God's people to be saved, their enemies must be destroyed. Salvation and judgment always go hand-in-hand in Scripture. Pharaoh and his army are drowned while Israel dances free (Ex 14-15). The Jews living under Babylonian rule slaughter their enemies in order that they might not be killed (Est 9). Babylon, the depiction of the world as it persecutes the people of God, is destroyed so that God's people might be free (Rev 18; Isa 63). In the curses against his enemies, the psalmist is asking God to save him by destroying those who would destroy him. This is part of what it means to be saved in the fullest sense. One might say that the psalmist is saved *by* God's judgment on his attackers.

III. Christ the Savior: His First Coming

The Jewish people understood that salvation came through deliverance from their oppressors. Hence, when the crowds suspected Jesus to be the Messiah—God's Anointed One, the Son of David, the King of Israel—they also expected him to rain down fire and hail upon the heads of the nations, particularly the Roman Empire. After Jesus miraculously fed the five thousand, the crowd wanted to make him king (Jn 6:15). Jesus' disciples kindly offered to call down fire from heaven to consume the unbelieving Samaritans (Lk 9:54). The apostle Peter violently attacked the high priest's servant, cutting off his ear with a sword (Jn 18:10). Time and time again the disciples fail to understand that Christ's purpose was not to instigate a military revolution and reinstate the political kingship of David, but rather to bear the sins of his people, suffer, and die, before rising from the grave. He came not in the glorious raiment of a conquering king but in the form of a servant, humbling himself by becoming obedient to death on a cross.

The enemies that Jesus came to deal with in his first coming were not all of rebellious humanity; they were sin, death, and Satan. This is the shocking news of the gospel: that when the Son of God came to earth, he did not meet out justice against the world, but instead he died on a cross in order to reconcile us to the Father. The Blessed One became a curse on the tree so that his people might receive the blessing of Abraham. The Sinless One became sin so that his people might become the righteousness of God. Jesus underwent death—the wages of sin—that his people might have life. The Son of God was treated as an enemy of God so that his people might become sons of God. Beautifully and ironically, Jesus Christ acted as a conquering king precisely by suffering and dying. By his death and resurrection, he freed his people from their sins (Rom 6), from the tyranny of the devil (Col 2:15), and from the power of death (1 Cor 15). He is indeed the King, and when he came he inaugurated the kingdom of God (Matt 4:17). This kingdom, however, is not now a geo-political kingdom, as was the nation of Israel under the old

covenant, but a spiritual kingdom. It spreads not by military conquest but by the proclamation of the gospel to all the world.

The sacrificial nature of Jesus' first coming shapes the way believers are to live now. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those you curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Lk 6:27-28). As Christians have been shown mercy when they were enemies of God, so they are to love their own enemies. God sent his Son not first to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him (Jn 3:17). So too Christians are not to call down condemnation on all their enemies but are to point everybody to Son of Man who was lifted up on a cross. In his second epistle, Peter says that the Lord has delayed judgment in order that many might repent and be saved (2 Pet 3:8-9). The time before Christ's return is a gift given out of the mercy of God. If this is so, then believers should spend their energy telling the world of the mercy of God offered in Christ. Indeed, God's enemies are removed when they becoming his friends.

IV. Christ the Judge: His Second Coming

The Bible teaches that Christ will return to earth, this time in glory, to judge the living and the dead (Heb 9:28; Mk 13:26-27; 1 Thess 4:16; Rev 19-20). When he returns, he will consummate his kingdom on earth, making perfect his saints and casting all of his and their enemies into the lake of fire. When he comes, all of the cries of the psalmist will be heard and answered in fullness (Rev 14:8; 18:1ff).

In the meantime, Christians are called to wait for the King to return. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come," a prayer which in its fullness is asking for the Second Coming, the judgment of the wicked and the acquittal of the righteous. Revelation teaches Christians to pray, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus!"—following right on the heels of the judgment of Babylon and the dwelling of God with men. When believers ask for these things, they pray, at least implicitly, imprecatory prayers.

How do believers blessing their enemies while also praying for Jesus to right all wrongs? In what sense may or may not believers pray imprecatory psalms? Here are a few considerations:

First, pray imprecatory psalms against Satan and his evil works. Satan is the great enemy of God and his people. He will not be redeemed, but he will be cast into the lake of fire. Scripture teaches us to resist the Devil (Jas 4:7). We do not fight against flesh and blood but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places (Eph 6:12). Pray that he would be increasingly bound and his influence increasingly lessened, understanding that in the present time this happens by the light of the gospel shining forth into the darkness.

Second, pray against sin. This must start by praying against it in one's own heart and life. More than the numbers of the hair on the head, indeed, are the enemies of the believer—understanding that temptations and sins abound in his heart. Confess and repent; put to death the deeds of the flesh. This should flow outward, however, to prayers regarding sin in others and in the church and in the world.

Third, pray for the salvation of God's oppressed people. The psalmist prays for judgment against his enemies because he is in a position of being oppressed by them and is seeking relief. The prayer is not merely for judgment *per se* but for judgment insofar as it brings deliverance. Such a prayer during this time of gospel proclamation might look something like this, "Lord, have mercy on ____ and save them, but if you won't, please remove them from harming your people."

Fourth, Christians may *not* use the imprecatory psalms as justification for personal vindictiveness, blasting curses on whomever happened to cut them off in traffic. They are the prayers of people who are oppressed and seeking deliverance from the righteous hand of God, and they look for the Lord to administer justice. The apostle Paul writes, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (Rom 12:19). Christians must submit to the Lord’s wisdom, trusting his timing in all things.

Fifth, Christians should pray imprecatory psalms from a stance of great humility, recognizing that they themselves were once enemies of God but were shown mercy. Paul’s admonition to the Romans is strong: “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (Rom 12:14). Even while looking to the Lord and crying to him to deliver them, even while waiting eagerly for the Lord’s kingdom to come, believers under persecution are still to show love to their enemies and pray not for their damnation but for their salvation.