



IMPRECATORY
PSALMS

Imprecatory psalms are psalms which call for judgment, calamity, or curses upon various foes.

They include some kind of call for God to bring judgment, calamity, or curse on an enemy.

*Let death seize them; Let them go down alive into hell,
For wickedness is in their dwellings and among them. Ps
55:15*

Psa 109:1 <To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David.> Do not keep silent, O God of my praise!

2 For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful Have opened against me; They have spoken against me with a lying tongue.

3 They have also surrounded me with words of hatred, And fought against me without a cause.

4 In return for my love they are my accusers, But I give myself to prayer.

5 Thus they have rewarded me evil for good, And hatred for my love. 6 Set a wicked man over him, And let an accuser stand at his right hand.

7 When he is judged, let him be found guilty, And let his prayer become sin. 8 Let his days be few, And let another take his office. 9 Let his children be fatherless, And his wife a widow.

10 Let his children continually be vagabonds, and beg; Let them seek their bread also from their desolate places.

11 Let the creditor seize all that he has, And let strangers plunder his labor.

12 Let there be none to extend mercy to him, Nor let there be any to favor his fatherless children. 13 Let his posterity be cut off, And in the generation following let their name be blotted out.

14 Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD, And let not the sin of his mother be blotted out.

15 Let them be continually before the LORD, That He may cut off the memory of them from the earth;

16 Because he did not remember to show mercy, But persecuted the poor and needy man, That he might even slay the broken in heart.

17 As he loved cursing, so let it come to him; As he did not delight in blessing, so let it be far from him.

18 As he clothed himself with cursing as with his garment, So let it enter his body like water, And like oil into his bones.

19 Let it be to him like the garment which covers him, And for a belt with which he girds himself continually.

20 Let this be the LORD'S reward to my accusers, And to those who speak evil against my person.

May we pray this way?

The presence of the “imprecations” (curses) in the Psalms has caused many Christians to be confused, especially in light of Jesus’ instruction to turn the other cheek and to pray for one’s enemies (Matthew 5:39, 44), and His own example on the cross (Luke 23:34).

C.S. Lewis described the imprecatory trap, "The hatred is there--festering, gloating, undisguised...we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it, or (worse still) used it to justify similar passions in ourselves."

Lewis worried the imprecations encourage a man "to add, explicitly or implicitly, 'Thus saith the Lord' to the expression of his own emotions or even his own opinions" as some contemporary people do.

[Lewis, C.S. *Reflections on the Psalms*](#). Harcourt Brace, 195

Curses in the Bible are not limited to the imprecatory psalms. For example, in Genesis 9:25 Noah curses his grandson Canaan. The prophets contain many curses in the books of Hosea, Micah, and Jeremiah, for example.

In the New Testament we also find curses:

1 Corinthians 16:22 – "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha."

Galatians 1:8–9 – "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed."

2 Timothy 4:14 – "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil: the Lord reward him according to his works:"

Psalm	Description
Psalm 5	A plea for God to destroy enemies.
Psalm 10	A cry against the wicked and their arrogance.
Psalm 17	A request for protection from oppressors.
Psalm 35	A call for God to contend with adversaries.
Psalm 58	A denunciation of unjust rulers.
Psalm 59	A plea for deliverance from enemies.
Psalm 69	A request for God's indignation against foes.
Psalm 79	A lament for the destruction of Jerusalem.
Psalm 83	A call for God to act against confederate enemies.
Psalm 94	A plea for justice against the wicked.
Psalm 109	A strong curse against a deceitful enemy.
Psalm 137	A lament expressing a desire for vengeance.
Psalm 140	A request for protection from violent men.

Actually, these prayers in the psalms are not curses at all; rather, they are appeals to God to do something about wrongs perpetrated against the psalmists, asking God to impose penalties commensurate with the violence done (cf. Ps 28:4) in accordance with normal judicial procedure in human courts (Deuteronomy 25:1-3).

Psa 28:4 Give them according to their deeds, And according to the wickedness of their endeavors; Give them according to the work of their hands; Render to them what they deserve.

The psalmists knew that the one who has been wronged is not to right that wrong by his own action, but is to leave the matters the Lord who says, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” (Deuteronomy 32:35; cf. Proverbs 20:22; Romans 12:19).

These psalms invoke judgment or curses upon enemies or those perceived as enemies of God.

These Psalms express deep emotions and a desire for divine justice against perceived wrongdoers. They appeal their cases to the divine Judge (cf. Jeremiah 15:15).

Jer 15:15 O LORD, You know; Remember me and visit me,
And take vengeance for me on my persecutors. In Your
enduring patience, do not take me away. Know that for Your
sake I have suffered rebuke.

They ask God to carry out the punishment already prescribed.
Psa 7; 35; 40; 55; 58; 59; 69; 79; 109; 137; 139; 144

These prayers are not expressions of personal vengeance. In fact, most imprecations are in psalms written by David, perhaps the least vengeful man in the OT (consider his dealings with Saul, Nabal, Absalom, Shimei, etc).

David never asks to be allowed to “get even” with or “pay back” his enemies. His prayer is that God would act justly in dealing with transgressors. David’s passion was for the triumph of divine justice, not the satisfaction of personal malice. The OT was as much opposed to seeking personal vengeance against one's personal enemies as is the NT (see Exod. 23:4-5; Lev. 19:17-18).

Lev 19:7 ¶ ` You shall not hate your brother in your heart.
You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin
because of him.

18 ` You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge
against the children of your people, but you shall love
your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.

Psa 58:1 <To the Chief Musician. Set to "Do Not Destroy." A Michtam of David.> Do you indeed speak righteousness, you silent ones? Do you judge uprightly, you sons of men?

2 No, in heart you work wickedness; You weigh out the violence of your hands in the earth.

3 The wicked are estranged from the womb; They go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies.

4 Their poison is like the poison of a serpent; They are like the deaf cobra that stops its ear,

5 Which will not heed the voice of charmers, Charming ever so skillfully.

6 Break their teeth in their mouth, O God! Break out the fangs of the young lions, O LORD!

7 Let them flow away as waters which run continually; When he bends his bow, Let his arrows be as if cut in pieces.

8 Let them be like a snail which melts away as it goes, Like a stillborn child of a woman, that they may not see the sun.

9 Before your pots can feel the burning thorns, He shall take them away as with a whirlwind, As in His living and burning wrath.

10 The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance; He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked,

11 So that men will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; Surely He is God who judges in the earth."

PRAVERS FOR THE DEFEAT OF THE WICKED. Most notable: 36, 69, 109, 137; though also statements in 5, 7, 28, 54, 55, 58, 59, 79, 83, 101, 139.

POETIC STATEMENTS. Some imprecations exhibit only hyperbole, as Psalms 58:10 “that you may bathe your feet in blood”.

ABHORRENCE OF SIN. The curses are essentially on the evil of sin, and when the man is condemned, it is because of the punishment of the sin involves the individual sinner (101:8; 139:21).

LEAVING VENGEANCE IN GOD'S HANDS (Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19). Psalms 37:8-9 teaches the committing of sinners into the hands of God for justice (cf. Ps 104:34-35; 58:11).

Deut 32:35 Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; Their foot shall slip in due time; For the day of their calamity is at hand, And the things to come hasten upon them.'

Psa 37:8 Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Do not fret-- it only causes harm.

9 For evildoers shall be cut off; But those who wait on the LORD, They shall inherit the earth [land].

10 For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more; Indeed, you will look carefully for his place, But it shall be no more.

11 But the meek shall inherit the earth [land], And shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace.

POSITIVE GOAL BEYOND PRIVATE VINDICATION.

David is noted for the way in which he often forgave Saul; and similarly, in Psa 109:2-5 he disclaims any personal desire for vengeance. But he continues with one of the most devastating imprecations. But note his rationale in Psa 109:26-27.

²⁶ Help me, O LORD my God! Oh, save me according to Your mercy,

²⁷ That they may know that this *is* Your hand-- *That* You, LORD, have done it!

POSITIVE GOAL BEYOND PRIVATE VINDICATION.

A man's zeal for God and for the vindication of His righteousness may involve the vindication of the individual himself.

“My eyes have seen the downfall of my enemies. . . to show that the Lord is upright (Psa 92:11, 15; cf. Psa 54:7). See Psa 52:6: *the righteous shall see and fear*.

Psa 35:19 *Let them not rejoice over me who are **wrongfully** my enemies;*

Imprecations in the Psalms

The fact that some of the psalms include curses in the prayers creates a tension for us today. It is necessary, therefore, to offer a few words of clarification on this issue.

There are about 18 psalms with such curses in them, and of the approximately 370 verses of those psalms about 65 include anything that might be called imprecation.

It seems that these imprecations reflect the psalmist's personal vengeance, but the Bible, in recording what they said, is not holding that up as a model for praying. Yet the psalms were hymns to be sung in public worship; they are not simply records of personal vendetta.

However, even the law of Moses forbade private vengeance and even commanded love for the enemies (Lev. 19:18), a standard reiterated in the New Testament.

Paul, in Romans 12:19ff., forbids the sin of a revengeful spirit by means of two quotations from the Old Testament:

Deut. 32:35, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord”.

Prov. 25:21–22, “If your enemy hunger, give him bread to eat”.

The psalmists surely knew of such teachings and often expressed their reliance on the Lord in time of undeserved suffering.

1. Keep in mind is that these are prayers to God, and that they are written in lyric poetry. Hyperbole is a frequent figure of speech in the psalms. The psalmists, especially when suffering, expressed their feelings extravagantly.

2. These imprecations are the expression of the longing of the Old Testament believer for the vindication of God's righteousness. Their faith in God's goodness and righteousness was put to the test by the wickedness of others, and so they were left longing for vindication.

Their imprecations made it clear that the wicked deserve their curse. Even in the New Testament we have the cry for the Lord to avenge the blood of His people (Rev. 6:10).

3. These imprecations are expressions of zeal for God and His kingdom. The monarchy was the earthly administration of the theocratic kingdom. It fell to the monarch, David and his righteous followers, to protect the institutions of the nation against enemies who sought to overthrow them and the faith (e.g., Ahab and Jezebel).

So, if the king was God's representative, his enemies were not merely his enemies, but God's (see Ps. 139:19–22).

19 Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God! Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men.

20 For they speak against You wickedly; Your enemies take Your name in vain.

21 Do I not hate them, O LORD, who hate You? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?

22 I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

4. These imprecations are the psalmists' expressions of their hatred for sin. The enemies who were actually attacking the righteous and taunting their faith were the embodiment of evil—vile people, in whom falsehood and treachery, cunning, greed, hatred, cruelty, arrogance, and pride had found full expression.

Could David have pitied them and treated them with kindness? He did that, in so far as it was possible, but as a king he had to champion righteousness and punish evil-doers in order to safeguard God's program.

5. Finally, these imprecations form prophetic teachings about God's future dealings with sin and impenitent and persistent sinners. Of all the psalms that Jesus applied to himself, Psalms 69 and 109 appear frequently.
6. And so there is nothing in these imprecations that is out of harmony with God's intent for the wicked. They are not, then, simply statements of that which the psalmists wish God to do, but of that which God has done or certainly will do.

7. There are no imprecations that lay upon the wicked anything more terrible than that which is laid up for them if they persist in wickedness and rebellion. In short, the imprecations address the conflict of good and evil that will end in the triumph of righteousness.

The Prayers of Believers

Although there are helpful explanations for the imprecations, the emphasis in Christian prayers is different. And even though we may pray for the Lord to come, for His will to be done, which would mean judgment on the wicked, we are instructed to love our enemies and pray for them.

Properly understood, these exhortations reflect the new focus of spiritual service. The prayer life of the believer today should be better than that of Old Testament believers (which is not to say it will be better, if people do not pray).

We in the Church Age have a different relationship to God. We are not a covenant nation and do not live in a theocratic kingdom. We are a body of believers in union with Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God. Therefore, we have a more intimate relationship with the Lord.

New Testament believers should pray with greater confidence because of the revelation and experience of the fulness of the grace of God (Rom 8:32; Heb 4:16), but more often than not, the confidence of the psalmists is greater than ours.

We now have better priesthood so that believers today are able to pray with greater boldness and confidence because we have an eternal, sinless high priest who has passed into the heavenly sanctuary on our behalf.

Also, the New Testament teaches that the Holy Spirit makes intercession for us when we don't know how to pray for a situation. He will turn our feeble attempts into proper prayers (Rom 8:26).

This is one reason why Christians do not pray imprecatory prayers as they did in Israel; we pray for the salvation of the wicked.

Luk 6:27-28 "But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ "bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.

Evil people persist and the righteous today long for relief. We pray for it in general when we pray, "Come quickly, Lord Jesus."

We can pray for the Lord to be glorified through us as we endure affliction.

We can still learn from the prayers of believers in the Old Testament, for God has given them to us for our edification. Accordingly, the church has, with slight modifications here and there, adopted these prayers of Israel as part of its prayer life. There is much to be learned from studying these prayers.

MT 5:43 ¶ "You have heard that it was said, `You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

44 "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you.

1. The psalmists contrast their laments with their confidence. The expression of confidence is important in building faith. As a result, they could rehearse their praise for the answer to their prayer before it actually was given.

2. We also should note that they asked God to respond **so that He would be glorified**. Their petitions provided valid reasons why God should answer their prayers, and those reasons were always glorifying to God and His cause.

3. We will improve the prayers of the church if we include praise in them, the praise we want to give when He answers the prayers.

These imprecations are seen as appeals for divine justice for the following reasons:

- **Reliance on God as the Divine Judge:** The psalmists recognized that it was not their place to right wrongs through private vengeance. Instead, they resigned the matter into God's hands, appealing to Him as the **divine Judge** to carry out prescribed punishments. This aligns with the biblical principle that vengeance belongs to the Lord.

- **Appeal to a Divine Judge:** Unlike a personal vendetta, where an individual takes the law into his own hands, the psalmists relinquished the right to personal action. They appealed their cases to God as the "divine Judge," leaving the matter to the Lord who declared, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay".
- **Adherence to Judicial Procedure:** These imprecations are viewed as formal requests for God to rectify wrongs through penalties that are commensurate with the violence committed, following the "normal judicial procedure" found in human courts.

- **Vindication of God's Righteousness:** A primary motivation behind these appeals was the vindication of God's goodness and character. When malicious wickedness went unpunished, it put the psalmist's faith to the test; therefore, they prayed for the downfall of the wicked to demonstrate that the Lord is upright.

- **Zeal for God's Kingdom:** The psalmists viewed their enemies not merely as personal rivals but as enemies of God and His kingdom.

Because the king was God's earthly representative, protecting the nation against those who sought to overthrow the faith was seen as an act of safeguarding God's program.

• **Prophetic Statements of Divine Intent:** These imprecations are often understood as prophetic teachings regarding God's future dealings with sin.

They are not merely personal wishes but reflections of what God has already declared He will do to those who persist in rebellion.

Ultimately, these prayers address the ageless conflict between good and evil, anticipating the final triumph of righteousness.

- **Hatred of Sin:** The curses reflect an abhorrence of sin and the Satanic evil it represents. Because the wicked individuals described in these psalms were seen as the embodiment of sinful traits such as treachery and cruelty, the psalmists appealed for justice to halt the influence of such evil.

We must keep in mind that in most instances these prayers for divine judgment come only after extended efforts on the part of the psalmist to call the enemies of God to repentance.

These are not cases of a momentary resistance to God but of unrepentant, recalcitrant, incessant and haughty defiance of Him. In other words, the psalmist calls for divine judgment against them so long as they persist in their rebellion.

We love our enemies by praying for their repentance. But if they persist in rejection of God, our only recourse is to pray that God's judgment be full and fair.

David knows that he needs spiritual protection lest he “hate” God’s enemies for personal reasons. That is why he concludes Psalm 139 with the prayer that God purify his motives and protect his heart:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!” (vv. 23-24)

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