The imprecatory Psalms

Although the Psalms were written many years ago, in an age and culture very different from ours, they still speak to Christians today. The Psalms are timeless, for they express the whole range of human feelings and experiences — from dark doubts and deep depression to exuberant joy and thankful praise. Today, Christians' experience the same emotions. They are puzzled by the same problems of life, cry out in great need, and delight in praise and worship to the same God. We can identify with the poets of the Psalms in many ways. Yet, there are certain themes in the Psalms which cause many people, even sincere Christians, great problems. The imprecatory character of some of the Psalms, where the author requests God to punish and pour out His wrath against evildoers, poses problems which are not easily solved.

Problem Psalms

Of the one hundred and fifty Psalms, six are commonly classified as "imprecatory" Psalms. These are the 55th, 59th, 69th, 79th, 109th and 137th Psalms. Besides these Psalms, there are portions of other Psalms which include statements, calling for God's wrath and punishment to be executed upon the wicked. Some examples are Psalms 17:13-14, 35:4-6, 24-26, 58:6-11, 68:1, 71:13, 83:13-17, 94:1-7, 129:5-8, 140:9-11, 143:12, etc. How can we account for the petitions raised to God in regard for curses upon the wicked? "Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quick into hell" (Psalms 55:15), or "Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth" (Psalms 58:6), "Let them be blotted out of the book of the living?" (Psalms 69:28), "Pour out thy wrath upon the heathen" (Psalms 79:6), are some of the awesome curses the Psalmists wish upon their enemies. There are curses for God's wrath to come upon widows and children: "Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow" (Psalms 109:9f), and speaking about the Babylonians, the Psalmist says: "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones" (Psalms 137:9).

Unsatisfactory explanations

Various explanations have been given to explain these terrible imprecations of the Psalms. It simply will not do, however, to blame one particular author, for the Psalms quoted are composed by various authors: David, Asaph, and other unknown composers. The Psalmists are united in their desires for the execution of God's judgment upon the wicked.

Neither can we excuse the authors on the ground that they did not possess the teaching of Christ, which was to "love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you" (Matthew 5:44; Cf. 5:43-48). Perhaps not as clearly as in the New Testament, but the Old Testament people of God were taught to show love and kindness to their neighbors (Cf. Leviticus 19:17-18), and even to their enemies (Exodus 23:4-5; Proverbs 20:22; 24:17).

One solution offered to explain the problem of the imprecatory Psalms is the assertion that they do not express a desire for the doom of the wicked, but merely predict their doom. It is possible that some of the Psalms are predictions, but this can hardly be supported when one reads that these desires are in the form of prayers. "Destroy, O Lord, and divide their tongues" (Psalms 55:9), David prays as he addresses himself to God. At the beginning of the Psalm he indicates he is praying: "Give ear to my prayer, O God; and hide not thyself from my supplication" (vs. 1). That the Psalmists are praying is true to a greater or lesser extent of other imprecatory Psalms as well (Cf. Psalms 59, 69, 79, 94, 109, etc.). We are therefore forced to conclude that the imprecatory Psalms are desires for the doom of the wicked, and not merely predictive of their doom.
Dispensationalists, who divide history into seven distinct periods, offer a solution. By relegating the Psalms to the dispensation of law, and not to the dispensation of grace. They hold that the ethical concepts in the dispensation of law cannot be transferred or applied to the dispensation of grace. Therefore, while it was right for the Old Testament saints, living under the dispensation of law, to invoke divine judgment upon their enemies, as they do in the imprecatory Psalms, it would be wrong for Christians, living under the dispensation of grace, to do the same.

The dispensational treatment of the Psalms must be rejected for several reasons. There is no evidence in the Bible for the scheme of interpretation which divides history into seven distinct periods. By saying that what is right for David is wrong for us today, makes Scripture contradict Scripture. Furthermore, imprecations are not confined to the Psalms, but are to be found throughout the Scriptures. Moses, who was a very patient man in dealing with the rebelliousness of his people (Numbers 12:3), at the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram prays, "respect not thou their offerings" (Numbers 16:15). The writings of the prophets show they are personally involved when they prophesy God's punishment and vengeance upon evil and evildoers. "I am full of the fury of the Lord; I am weary with holding in: I will pour it out," Jeremiah cries (Jeremiah 6:11; cf. 7:20; 11:11; Ezekiel 5:16; Malachi 3:9, etc.).

Moreover, God's judgment and curses upon the wicked is not a typically Old Testament phenomenon. Some of the most fearsome of the imprecatory Psalms are quoted in the New Testament. In Acts 1:20 reference is made to Psalm 69:26 and Psalm 109:8 in alluding to the terrible punishment of Judas (Cf. Matthew 26:24). Romans 11:9 refers to Psalm 69:22f. in connection with the judgment upon the unbelief of the Jews in Jesus as the Messiah. Peter's words to Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), to Simon the magician (Acts 8:20-22), and Paul's words to Elymas (Acts 13:10) and to Alexander the coppersmith (2 Timothy 4:14) are of an imprecatory nature. Most awe some are the imprecations upon those who reject the Gospel. "If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema" (or accursed) (1 Corinthians 16:22; cf. Galatians 1:8-9; 2 Timothy 4:14; Acts 23:3, etc.). Although not used as imprecations, the references to imprecatory Psalms in the New Testament show the authority of these Psalms as a whole. Romans 13:3a refers to Psalms 5:10; Romans 13b refers to Psalms 140:4; and Romans 3:14 refers to Psalms 10:7, all of which contain imprecations. Romans 15:3 refers to Psalms 69:9, one of the most awesome of the imprecatory Psalms.

The suggestion of C. S. Lewis that the imprecations of the Psalms are due to "human qualities" because Scripture merely "carries the Word of God" (C. S. Lewis, Reflections on the Psalms, pp. 87 and 112), contradicts New Testament teaching and also is contrary to the doctrine of inspiration (2 Timothy 3:16). It also refutes David's own claim for inspiration. In 2 Samuel 23:1 and 2 he claims divine inspiration for the Psalms when he says:

"Now these be the last words of David, David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet Psalmist of Israel, said, The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and his word was in my tongue."

That David to whom most of the imprecatory Psalms are attributed, would seek personal revenge and show vindictiveness is contrary to everything we know of him. In the Psalms we also find him praying for his enemies (Psalms 35:13); he seeks their conversion (Psalms 2:10-12); and desires that they should fear God (Psalms 64:9, 10). Consider also how David twice saved the life of Saul, his most relentless enemy, when he was delivered into his hands (1 Samuel 24 and 26). Also note the charitable tone of the elegy upon the death of Saul (2 Samuel 1:17-27). See also his attitude towards Shimei (2 Samuel 16:5-14) and his mourning over Absalom (2 Samuel 18:33). Also, we find David inquiring, "Is there not yet any of the house of Saul, that I may show the kindness of God unto him?" (2 Samuel 9:3f). It does not do justice to David to ascribe a vengeful side to his character, as some do.

While David was not without sin, the explanation that David's imprecations upon his enemies are out of a desire for personal revenge, must be rejected. Rather, as a prophet of the Lord and a type of Christ, personal revenge was alien to the spirit of David and all God's servants in both the Old
and the New Testament. Rather, David prays to be kept from being vengeful and vindictive. “O Lord my God,” he prays:

If I have done this; if there be iniquity in my hands;
If I have rewarded evil unto him that was at peace with me;
(yea, I have delivered him that without cause is mine enemy):
Let the enemy persecute my soul, and take it;
yea, let him tread down my life upon the earth and lay mine honour in the dust.

(Psalms 7:3-5)

A suggestion that the Psalmists’ outbursts are typical of the moral feelings of humanity in response to the unusually brutal and inhumane crimes committed, is not satisfactory either. It is true, the imprecatory prayers are to the all-just God to judge and condemn the wicked. But it is not true that the imprecatory Psalms proceed wholly, or even primarily, from the outraged moral feelings of humanity at wickedness. To assert that is to overlook their divine inspiration and authority and to regard them as merely human compositions, the product of human religious experience and moral life. The words, “Neither let there be any to favour his fatherless children” (Psalms 109:12), and “Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones” (Psalms 137:9), can hardly be justified on the basis of the outraged moral feelings of humanity. Moreover, it is difficult to see how these words can be reconciled with Deuteronomy 24:16, which commands that “the fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the children be put to death for the fathers.” The prayer for the destruction of infants can hardly be justified upon the basis of moral feelings of indignation of mankind against evil. We must look for a solution which recognizes the divine character of the imprecatory Psalms and which justifies their terrible language.

Two wrong assumptions

The fundamental objection raised against the imprecatory Psalms is that it is immoral to wish or pray for the doom or destruction of another. Unconsciously perhaps, this objection is founded on two suppositions. The first is that the welfare of man is the chief end of man, and second, that God is only merciful and not also righteous and just to punish the guilty.

The presupposition that the welfare of man is the chief end of man is essentially humanistic and contrary to theism and the sovereignty of God as Creator. If man is created by God, then it follows that the chief end of man is to glorify God. Only by denying that man is required to worship Him in true obedience, can it be maintained that the chief end is the welfare of man. No doubt, many who have problems with the imprecatory Psalms do believe in God’s sovereignty. Yet, Christians in another age seemingly had no problems with the imprecatory nature of the Psalms. Calvin, in his exposition of Psalm 55:15, “Let death seize upon them,” says:

“In imprecating this curse he was not influenced by any bad feeling towards them, and must be understood as speaking not in his own cause but in that of God, and under the immediate guidance of His Spirit.”

(Commentary on the Psalms, Volume 2, p. 337)

Commenting on the controversial curse upon Edomite and Babylonian infants (Psalms 137:7-9), Calvin reminds us that Edom and Babylon had done much harm to Israel throughout many generations of their offspring. There was good reason to suppose that future generations, yet in infancy, would continue to do so.

It is God’s attribute of justice which demands punishment, not only upon sin, but also of the sinner. “The day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,” God told Adam (Genesis 2:17). If it is right for God to destroy evil and evil men in His universe, or to command His servants to effect that destruction, it was right for the Psalmists to pray for the destruction of the wicked. The imprecatory Psalms were uttered under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and were therefore in harmony with God’s will. The total destruction of evil, including the judicial destruction of evil men, is the prerogative of God. The imprecatory prayers offered by the Psalmists were therefore not prayers for personal revenge, but prayers for God to execute His justice and vindicate His righteousness.
Therefore David says, "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee?" (Psalms 139:21).

**Prophecies of Christ**

God's enemies were David's enemies. It was "against the Lord, and against his anointed" that the enemies raged (Psalms 2:1-2). Behind David's fierce enemies who were out to destroy him and the nation of Israel, was Satan. In David and in the nation of Israel was contained the Promised Seed. In David's loins was the Promised Seed which would be born from his royal lineage. This marked the bitter opposition of the enemy, which was already prophesied by God after Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed" (Genesis 3:15). The imprecations in the Psalms are in harmony of what God said in the garden of Eden, where God placed a curse upon Satan. This curse would find its fulfillment when David's Great Son would be born. "The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand until I make thine enemies thy footstool" (Psalms 110:1).

The Psalmists were actually praying for the Lord to display His attributes of justice and righteousness. Similarly the New Testament Christian prays: "Thy kingdom come." By thus praying, Christians call on God to establish His righteous reign. In the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, this means that we ask God to rule us so by thy word and Spirit, that we may submit ourselves more and more to thee; preserve and increase thy church; destroy the works of the devil, and all violence which would exalt itself against thee; and also, all wicked counsels devised against thy holy word; till the full perfection of thy kingdom take place, wherein thou shalt be all in all. (Answer 123; cf. Q & A 52)

Christ Himself repeatedly drew attention to the fact that curses rested upon all those who would not submit to His rule, and thus were His enemies (cf. Matthew 13:37-52; etc.). He also called imprecations upon the disobedient and evildoers. To the Pharisees who sought to undermine His rule, he had the most awesome imprecations: "Ye are like whited sepulchres ... Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers. Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell" (Matthew 23:13-33; cf. Luke 10:12-16, etc.).

*The imprecatory Psalms are, therefore, also Messianic. The Psalmists looked for the day when the Lord would reign and all His enemies were destroyed (Cf. Psalms 97:1-9; 45:3-7; 47:8; etc.). Christ's coming into the flesh ushered in this kingdom of righteousness (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; 10:7, etc.). The call of the Psalmist for God to execute justice and judgment finds its fulfilment in Christ, Who came to establish the kingdom of God. He came to extend mercy, but also to execute judgment upon the wicked.*

Christ's coming brought mercy, first of all. He came, "not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved" (John 3:17, 12:47). But it cost Him His life to extend mercy to guilty sinners. On the cross is presented the most awesome spectacle of divine justice. Here "mercy and truth met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Psalms 85:10). There Christ prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Therefore the day of grace for all God's enemies has been extended, and Peter, in rebuking Simon the magician, calls him to repentance and prayer (Acts 8:20-23), and Stephen prayed for his murderers (Acts 7:60). Because of Christ, the time of mercy has been extended.

**Looking for the Lord's return**

But one day God's awful wrath will fall upon all the wicked and disobedient to the Gospel, upon all who remain God's enemies. Then the curses will come in all their terrible and awesome fury. For then Christ will be no more the merciful Savior, but the Judge Who has the keys of hell and death (Revelation 1:16-18). For that day the souls before the altar in heaven are longing and praying, like the Psalmists of old. Like the Psalmists, their prayer is imprecatory in nature. "And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?" (Revelation 6:10) The cries for the revelation of God's justice and
righteousness of the souls in heaven are essentially the same as the imprecatory prayers of the Psalmists who longed for the Day when the Judge of all the earth would do right.

Therefore, not only the prayers for help and the songs of joy and praise are meaningful for God's people today. But they also can identify with the imprecatory parts of the Psalms as they express the longing for Christ's return, when He shall come to judge the living and the dead. According to the Heidelberg Catechism, it is a comfort to know that Christ returns and judges.

Because in all my sorrow and persecutions, with uplifted head I look for the same person, who before offered himself for my sake, to the tribunal of God, and has removed all curse from me, to come as judge from heaven: who shall cast all his and my enemies into everlasting condemnation, but shall translate me with all his chosen ones to himself, into heavenly joys and glory (Q & A 52).

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