

The "Imprecatory" Psalms

Psalms which call for punishment are called "Imprecatory Psalms." To imprecate is to curse. The language of imprecatory psalms is often shocking.

Break the arm of the wicked and evildoer; call his wickedness to account till you find none. (Psa. 10:15)

O God, break the teeth in their mouths; tear out the fangs of the young lions, O Lord!... Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child who never sees the sun. (Psa. 58:6, 8)

Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them. (Psa. 69:24)

Some wonder how such language could be consistent with the command to love our enemies, forgive, and be merciful. Consider the following points.

(1) Some dismiss this as Old Testament "harshness," but imprecations are common in the New Testament. Jesus, who commanded us to love our enemies and pray for our persecutors, also said, "Woe!" to the wicked (Matt. 11:20-24; 23:1-39). Paul imprecated false teachers (Gal. 1:8) and asked God to repay certain people who'd done harm to him and impeded the preaching of the good news (2 Tim. 4:14).

(2) Those whom the psalmists called upon God to punish were hardened in their rebellion against God and did great harm to God's people, innocent victims, and whole nations. Such evil should not go unpunished. (Psa. 5:9-10; 10:2-14; 58:1-2)

(3) The psalmists asked God to take care of the vengeance. These are not rash threats from man but thoughtful calls for God to act. (Psa. 58:11)

(4) The psalms are inspired, as the New Testament frequently testified. They express divinely approved appeals. (Matt. 22:43-44; Heb. 3:7-11)

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(5) The intended outcomes include demonstrating God's just nature (resulting in praise), stopping violence and oppression, silencing error that leads people astray, and deterring others from sinning. (Psa. 5:6; 10:17-18; 58:11; 69:32)

(6) The condition of repentance is often implicit. That is, "*Pour out your indignation upon them* [if they do not repent]..." Sometimes, the condition is stated explicitly, as in Psa. 7:12 - *If a man does not repent, God will whet his sword; he has bent and readied his bow.* God's people wish for others to become righteous. But if they will not, then it is appropriate to ask for God's justice to be enforced (Rev. 6:10).

In the same context as these words:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. (Rom. 12:14)

We also find these words:

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)

God himself hopes for salvation and affords everyone the opportunity (Eze. 18:32; 2 Peter 3:9; 1 Tim. 2:4). But upon those who reject God's mercy, he executes vengeance. It is righteous for us to likewise desire salvation first and justice second. It is not our place to personally take vengeance, but we must commit it to God's hands. That is exactly what the imprecatory psalms do.