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INTERPRETATION AND APPLICATION OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

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BY
ANDREW M. NEMMERS
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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
PART I: REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE.....	3
PART II: INTERPRETATION OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS	6
PART III: APPLYING THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS	34
CONCLUSION.....	43
APPENDIX: TABLE OF NEW TESTAMENT IMPRECATIONS	45
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	46

ABSTRACT

“Break the teeth in their mouths, O God. Like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun” (Ps 58:6,8). Such curses have shocked casual readers of the psalms and biblical scholars alike for years. They seem to be incompatible with Jesus’ command, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). For this reason, many Christians have simply tried to ignore these psalms, or to explain them away. This paper will assert that the imprecatory psalms are compatible with Jesus’ command to love our enemies and are applicable to the twenty-first-century American congregation.

INTRODUCTION

Children are being murdered in front of our eyes. Many of our rulers govern for the sake of personal gain rather than the best interest of their people. Every day we hear people cursing God and ridiculing us for believing in him. Our nation is at war with groups that seek to incite terror in the hearts of any who oppose them. These are statements that could just as easily be uttered by Christians today as they were by the writers of the imprecatory psalms. Is there not an eerie similarity between the complaints of the psalmists in Old Testament Israel and the problems facing Christians in America today?

For years the imprecatory psalms were largely ignored. However, scholars chose to interpret these psalms, the conclusion seemed to be the same: These psalms have no place in modern-day worship. In his commentary on the Psalms, John Brug explains the lack of use in modern day America, “It is hard to pray imprecatory prayers from padded pews.”¹ And yet later he also pointed to the possibility that Christians would be moved to pray imprecatory psalms more often as the end draws nearer.² In the years since the writing of his commentary, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of school shootings. Politicians and other public figures have been accused of sexual misconduct. The rise of ISIS has brought the persecution of Christians back into the public eye. Atheism has doubled among members of the next generation, Generation Z.³ All of a sudden, Christians find themselves in a position not unlike that of the writers of the imprecatory psalms.

Although there is no doubt a unique opportunity to apply these psalms today, the questions of interpretation still remain. Can Christians use such shockingly violent language as is

¹ John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 1-72* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 27.

² Ibid, 27.

³ “Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z.” Barna.com. <http://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z> (accessed November 23, 2018).

found in these psalms? How can Christians reconcile these psalms which curse enemies with Jesus' command to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you?" (Matt 5:44) The answers to these interpretive questions will shape the application of these psalms. For this reason, this thesis will focus first on interpretation, then on application. Through examination of key passages and a review of scholarly literature, this paper will show that the imprecatory psalms have a place both in the corporate worship of a congregation and in the devotional life of a Christian.

PART I: REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

There are relatively few books that have dealt solely with the imprecatory psalms. Many commentaries on the book of Psalms refer to them, but few spend time discussing their practical implications. The first author to write on these psalms in a major published work was Johannes Vos in *The Westminster Theological Journal* in 1942. His work, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms,” gives a history of how the psalms had been interpreted up to that point, then argues that they should have a place in the church. His work is valuable, although brief. While his application section is still relevant, his history of interpretation has now become quite outdated, as much has been written on this topic since 1942.

In the last twenty five years, much has changed in scholarly literature concerning the imprecatory psalms. Several books have been written on the topic, all dealing both with interpretation and application. Erich Zenger’s *A God of Vengeance* was probably the most influential book on the subject in the twentieth century. His thesis was that “the psalms of enmity are a way of robbing the aggressive images of the enemies of their destructiveness, and transforming them into constructive forces.”⁴ While this work was extensive in the areas of exegesis and hermeneutics, it was more focused on interpretation of what was written in the past than on an application that could be taken into the future.

James Adams set out in 1991 to address the topic of praying and preaching the imprecatory psalms in his *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*. While there was much to like about the book itself, such as the questions for discussion at the end of each chapter and the sample sermons in the appendix, the author bases his work on the assumption that all

⁴ Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), vii.

imprecatory psalms are the words of Christ.⁵ Because he eliminates the possibility of other interpretations, his work is of little value to those who do not share his nuanced interpretation of the imprecatory psalms.

When it comes to both interpretation and application, the most complete treatment of the imprecatory psalms is *Praying Curses* by Daniel Michael Nehrbass. Published in 2013, it gives an up-to-date history of interpretation of the imprecatory psalms. His history of interpretation is extremely thorough and well-organized. This paper's history of interpretation will lean heavily upon it. As far as the interpretation Nehrbass himself puts forward, there is much to like. He has a high view of Scripture, so he defends the imprecatory psalms as God's inspired Word and argues that they are still useful to the church today.

Praying Curses is also valuable in the area of application. Nehrbass argues that imprecatory psalms can and should be preached in the church. He even includes five sample sermons in his book. Another area of application Nehrbass touched on was using the imprecatory psalms in counseling. He argued that there would be therapeutic value for victims of trauma in praying the imprecatory psalms.

Along with the books mentioned above, several articles and academic works address the topic of the imprecatory psalms. Many of the articles simply give an overview of the imprecatory psalms, commenting on one or two of them in order to make a general point about the interpretation of these psalms. One that has a unique viewpoint, however, is a paper written by Peter White. His paper explains the reasons behind the growing trend of imprecatory prayer in Africa. In his article, he distinguishes between proper and improper use of these psalms. In doing

⁵ There are certain imprecatory psalms that can be interpreted as the words of Christ, but applying this method to all imprecatory psalms is poor interpretation.

so, he addresses righteous versus unrighteous anger. His work is valuable in the context of applying these psalms to the modern situation in America.

While the use of the imprecatory psalms in counseling is not a main part of the focus of this paper, Dominick D. Hankle's article, "The Therapeutic Implications of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Christian Counseling Setting," proved valuable. He argues in his article that these psalms are useful in counseling because they "provide a valuable mechanism for the cathartic release of negative emotion."⁶ Hankle's psychological perspective on these psalms helps to establish their value in the private devotional life of Christians.

⁶ Dominick D. Hankle, "The Therapeutic Implications of the Imprecatory Psalms in the Christian Counseling Setting," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 38, no. 4 (January 2011), 275-280.

PART II: INTERPRETATION OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

Identification of the Imprecatory Psalms

In order to discuss the imprecatory psalms, it would be beneficial first to identify which psalms are imprecatory. The definition of imprecatory psalms is fairly uniform across biblical scholarship. Imprecatory psalms are those psalms which contain curses or wishes for punishment of enemies. While the definition is widely agreed upon, the classification of which psalms are and are not imprecatory varies to a degree. Some speak of imprecatory psalms simply as a subcategory of the psalms of lament, combining them with psalms that cry out to God in distress. These scholars will state that over one third of the psalms in the psalter have characteristics of lament or imprecation. Others count every psalm that has in it any element of cursing or wishing evil upon enemies. This classification would mean that there are 21 imprecatory psalms: Psalms 2, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12, 35, 37, 40, 52, 54, 56, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 109, 137, 139, and 143.

However, of the one hundred fifty psalms in the psalter, nine of them have a major theme of imprecation. These are Psalms 7, 35, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137, and 139.⁷ For the purposes of this paper the narrower classification will be used. However, most of the statements made in this paper concerning these imprecatory psalms will also apply to other imprecations across the canon.

A History of Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms

Biblical scholars throughout history have struggled to interpret the imprecatory psalms. Their violent language shocks the reader, often causing him to wonder if such prayers could possibly be pleasing in God's sight. Unfortunately, many good scholars have stumbled at this

⁷J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (1981): 36.

point. What follows is a brief overview of the incorrect interpretations of the imprecatory psalms. These interpretations vary widely, though they all stumble over at least one aspect of these psalms. These interpretations either deny that the imprecatory psalms are inspired, that they are speaking of real enemies, that they are valid prayers, or that they are prayers of the psalmist at all.

Incorrect Interpretation I: The Imprecatory Psalms are not Inspired

The first incorrect interpretation is that these psalms are so wicked and violent that they cannot possibly be the Word of God. The proponents of this theory believe the imprecatory psalms should not be a part of the canon, and Christians should ignore them or explain them away. There are several scholars who advocate for this interpretation. The most notable, and perhaps most surprising, is C.S. Lewis. In his *Reflections on the Psalms*, he writes, “One way of dealing with these terrible or (dare we say?) contemptible Psalms is simply to leave them alone.”⁸

Lewis’s problem with these psalms is the obvious hatred they show for the psalmist’s enemies. He does not deny that the psalmist was facing real human enemies, but he concludes that the prayers the psalmist prays about his enemies are sinful. He believes that he is protecting the integrity of God’s Word by saying these psalms are not inspired. Lewis does not want to condone something that the rest of God’s Word seems to forbid. Lewis explains,

“At the outset I felt sure, and I feel sure still, that we must either try to explain them away or to yield for one moment to the idea that, because it comes in the Bible, all this vindictive hatred must somehow be good and pious. We must face both facts squarely. The hatred is there – festering, gloating, undisguised – and also we should be wicked if we in any way condoned or approved it, or (worse still) used it to justify similar passions in ourselves.”⁹

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: HarperOne, 2017), 21.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

Thus, Lewis denies both that the imprecatory psalms are God's inspired Word, and that they are proper prayers of the psalmist. Having denied these psalms are God's Word, scholars are forced to come up with a purpose for them. In his *Biblical Basis of the Imprecatory Psalms*, Eun Chae Cheong quotes Frank Cross who says, "There is a considerable list of Psalms which the Christian Church would do well to preserve only in the ancient record as evidence of the pit from whence we have been dug."¹⁰ This thought borders on the dispensationalist viewpoint which will be discussed below.

The weakness of this interpretation is obvious: It fails to let God's Word speak and denies its inspiration. One simply needs to look to 2 Timothy 3:16 to find the weakness of this theory, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful." Proponents of this theory let their reason overtake their trust in God's Word, thinking they have to make excuses for what God has clearly said. This interpretive theory can be dismissed, as it denies the clear scriptural teaching of inspiration and thus allows for no contemporary application.

Incorrect Interpretation II: The Imprecatory Psalms are not Prayed against Human Enemies

A second flawed interpretation of the imprecatory psalms denies that the psalmist has human enemies in mind. This interpretation is once again based on the thought that the psalmist could not possibly be saying such violent things against human enemies without being guilty of sin. The proponents of this theory state that the psalmist must have been praying against the abstract forces of evil, the devil, or evil spirits.

Augustine was of the opinion, for example that the phrase, "break the teeth in their mouths" from Psalm 58:6 was an allegory for Jesus' giving wise answers to the Pharisees and

¹⁰ Eun Chae Cheong, *Biblical Basis of the Imprecatory Psalms: Special Attention to Psalms 109 and 35*, M.A. Thesis for Columbia Biblical Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina, 1987, 86.

teachers of the law who tried to trap him in his words.¹¹ Another example of this view is Howard Osgood, who believed that “dashing the little ones against the rocks” from Psalm 137:9 was figurative language for unbelievers (children of evil) being dashed against (judged by) the rock of Christ.¹²

Some scholars have also pointed out that there is a parallel to other Ancient Near Eastern literature in cursing spiritual enemies. Harold Wayne Ballard makes a case for this interpretation, pointing out similarities to the divine warrior motifs in Ancient Near Eastern writings. While his attention to historical context is commendable, he ends up in the same place as Augustine and Osgood, claiming that the enemies referred to in the imprecatory psalms are not physical but spiritual forces of evil.

The problem with this interpretation is that many psalms clearly name the human enemies to whom they are referring. In Psalm 7, the heading reads, “A *shiggaion* of David, which he sang to the LORD concerning Cush, a Benjamite.” Psalm 59 mentions Saul and the men who had been sent to kill him. In Psalm 83, Asaph names Edom, Moab, Byblos, Ammon and Amalek, Philistia, the people of Tyre, and Assyria. It is clear that Asaph has certain nations in mind. It would be difficult to find an allegorical parallel to each of these nations.

Saying that these prayers could only be valid if spoken against spiritual enemies would also take away a good portion of their application. While they could still be prayed against Satan and the forces of evil, they would lose their application to situations in which believers are facing human enemies. For these reasons, the theory that the psalmists were speaking of spiritual enemies should be dismissed.

¹¹ Zenger, 36.

¹² Daniel Michael Nehrbass, *Praying Curses: The Therapeutic and Preaching Value of the Imprecatory Psalms* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 14.

Incorrect Interpretation III: The Imprecatory Psalms are not God-pleasing Prayers

Perhaps the largest and most varied category of interpretation is the one that denies that the imprecatory psalms are valid prayers, while still trying to maintain their inspiration. In the *Halley's Bible Handbook*, this theory is explained, "They are not God's pronouncements of His wrath on the wicked; but are the prayers of a man for vengeance on his enemies, just the opposite of Jesus' teaching that we should love our enemies."¹³ In saying this, Halley is claiming that the prayers are not endorsed by God, but simply recorded in his Word. He cites Goliath as an example, saying that his threat, "Come here and I'll give your flesh to the birds and the wild animals," (1 Sam 17:44) is an example of a false promise in Scripture that did not come true. By the same logic, he says, the psalms are sinful wishes for evil recorded in God's Word that did not or will not come true.

There are several subsets to this interpretation. Harris Birkeland wrote in his book, *Evildoers in the Book of Psalms*, that the society in which the Israelites lived was accustomed to cursing enemies. His approach says that the curses were simply part of the Israelite culture, and now that culture has changed, they are no longer appropriate. The problem with this is that it leaves no room for modern-day application. It also assumes that God's standards of right and wrong change with society's standards.

A second subset is what can be called the quotation hypothesis. Chrysostom presented his interpretation of Psalm 137, "When he tells of the sufferings of others, he depicts their anger, their pain, bringing to the fore the desire of the Jews, who let their rage extend even to such a young age."¹⁴ In other words, the psalmist is not sinning because he is only recording the words his people spoke in sinful anger. While an argument could be made for this hypothesis in a few

¹³ Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 148.

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Psalms*, (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1998), 233.

places, it could not conceivably be applied to all the imprecations found in Scripture. Again, it comes at the problem with the presupposition that such curses are sinful, leading the interpreter to dream up a solution for a problem that does not have to be a problem.

Johannes Vos speaks of another subset of this interpretation which regards the imprecatory psalms as “outbursts of the moral feeling of humanity called forth by unusually brutal or inhuman crimes.”¹⁵ Vos, without giving an example of a scholar who proposed this theory, says that this theory is based on the idea that there were certain crimes committed against the Israelites that were so heinous they legitimized cursing enemies.

This interpretation seems to attempt to impose human standards of justice upon God. The thought would be that, in Psalm 137, the Babylonians had dashed the Israelites’ little ones against the rocks, so the Israelites were justified in asking for God to do the same to Babylon. While it is true that the Old Testament civil law had this character to it, as evidenced by the “eye for an eye” law in Exodus 21:24, this in and of itself does not legitimize the Israelites cursing the Babylonians in this way. There are also many places in the imprecatory psalms where such an explanation would not work, such as Psalm 69:28: “May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.” Are we to assume that the enemies in question had blotted out David’s name from the book of life, thus legitimizing his curse against them? Certainly not.

The final view in this category is the dispensationalist view. There are many proponents of this theory, which states that the imprecatory psalms were part of an outdated revelation of God’s Word. Their thought is that God progressively reveals himself over time, and the newest revelation takes precedence over the old. Thus, Jesus’ command for Christians to love their enemies in the Sermon on the Mount overrules these prayers from the Psalms. This view is different from others in the category in that it does not deny the validity of the prayers for the

¹⁵ Johannes Vos, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 4(1942), 129.

original authors. It states that the psalmists were justified in the way they prayed, but New Testament believers are under a different law and are therefore unable to pray in this way.

J. Carl Laney, in “A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms,” puts the imprecatory psalms on the same level as the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, as something outdated that is to be done away with:

In the light of the fact that the Abrahamic covenant reflects God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants, it would be inappropriate for a church-age believer to call down God’s judgment on the wicked. One can appreciate the Old Testament setting of the imprecatory psalms and teach and preach from them. However, like the ceremonial dietary laws of the Old Testament, the imprecations in the Psalms should not be applied to church-age saints.¹⁶

This interpretation has some obvious flaws. It essentially takes away all application from the Old Testament and makes it merely a historical record. A problem with the dispensationalist view in relation to the imprecatory psalms is that there are places where these psalms are quoted in the New Testament. John 15:25 quotes Psalm 109:3, and Romans 11:9-10 quotes Psalm 69:22-23, just to name a couple examples. There are even new imprecations found in the New Testament, including a reference in Revelation 6:9-11 to the saints in heaven, where there is no sin, praying for God’s vengeance to come upon the wicked. It is clear from these examples that the prayers the psalmists pray in the imprecatory psalms are consistent with God’s will throughout Scripture. For this reason, the dispensationalist view is unsatisfactory.

Incorrect Interpretation IV: The Imprecatory Prayers are not the Prayers of the Psalmist

A fourth and final classification of the incorrect interpretations of the imprecatory psalms is based on the thought that the imprecatory psalms are not prayers after all, at least not prayers of the psalmist. John Calvin is a notable proponent of this view. Calvin was of the opinion that

¹⁶ Laney, 44.

the verbs in the imprecatory psalms were not wishes of the psalmist, but prophecies. Thanks to the flexibility of the Hebrew imperfect tense, there could be a grammatical argument for his interpretation. However, there are several problems with this interpretation. The first is that the prophecies do not always come true. This would lead to a problem with the doctrine of inspiration. The only solution would be to make every imprecatory psalm a prophecy about Judgment Day. This is less than satisfactory, because it does not explain the physical, human descriptions that are used. Following this logic to its end would lead to an allegorical interpretation of the imprecatory psalms. In the end, this interpretation is unsatisfactory because it clearly set out to solve the apparent problem of a contradiction between these psalms and New Testament ethics. In doing so, the scholars who advocate for this view deny the fact that these were real prayers prayed about real enemies by real people.

Another way scholars have avoided the seeming problem with these psalms is by denying that they are the prayers of the psalmist himself. Instead, they take these cursing psalms and put them in the mouth of Jesus. They argue that humans are not righteous, and therefore cannot pray these psalms without being hypocritical. Therefore, they conclude, these psalms could only be spoken by Christ. This theory has several notable proponents. Perhaps the most notable is Luther. Luther interpreted the imprecatory psalms as Jesus' words spoken against the Jews who rejected and crucified Jesus.

Bonhoeffer also sees these psalms as messianic, though he takes a different view. Bonhoeffer argues that the wrath of God spoken of in the imprecatory psalms is not to be carried out against the Jews who killed Jesus. Instead, he speaks of that wrath being satisfied on the cross. He explains, "I pray the imprecatory psalms in the certainty of their marvelous fulfillment. I leave the vengeance to God and ask him to execute his righteousness to all his enemies,

knowing that God has remained true to himself and has himself secured justice in his wrathful judgment on the cross, and that this wrath has become grace and joy for us.”¹⁷ While there is a lot to like about this statement, Bonhoeffer takes his interpretation a little too far. It is certainly true that the psalmist is leaving vengeance in the hands of God, and the modern day reader should do the same. However, Bonhoeffer’s insistence that these psalms must be spoken by Jesus leads to the conclusion that there is no use for these psalms in the New Testament era.

This messianic interpretation is based more on the presupposition that these psalms cannot be prayed by sinful human beings than on good exegesis. As mentioned above, the psalmists name their human enemies. Thus, it would make little sense to try to force these curses into the mouth of Jesus alone. For these reasons, the exclusively messianic method of interpretation can be dismissed along with all who say that these psalms are not the prayers of the psalmist.

Proper Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms

The first step to a satisfactory interpretation of the imprecatory psalms is to start from the background of inspiration. Tim. 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful.” Therefore, it is logical to conclude, since the imprecatory psalms are part of Scripture, that they are not only inspired but also useful. As demonstrated above, there are those who would object to one or both of those conclusions. How could these psalms be inspired if they clearly contradict Jesus when he says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you?” (Mt 5:44) How could these psalms be inspired if they contradict Paul’s command in Romans 12:14, “Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse?” How could these psalms be useful to a Christian in the twenty-first century when they sound so violent and unloving? These are the questions this

¹⁷ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1970), 19.

section will seek to answer by giving general guidelines as well as looking at four imprecatory psalms in greater detail.

General Guidelines for a Proper Interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms

When faced with a seeming contradiction in Scripture, it is wise first to look for parallel passages. There are several passages throughout the Old Testament that shed some light on the imprecatory psalms. The first is the establishment of the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12:3. After promising to make Abram into a great nation, God says, “I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse.” It is important to note that in the imprecatory psalms, the psalmist is not seeking revenge on the evildoer himself but is asking God to curse his enemies. In this way the psalmist holds God to the promise he made to Abram while avoiding the sinful desire to take revenge into his own hands.

God speaks of this concept again in Deuteronomy 32:35, “It is mine to avenge, I will repay.” Scholars who are critical of the imprecatory psalms often cite this verse as proof that the psalmists should not pray such curses on the wicked. Such a criticism ignores the fact that there is no record of the psalm writers ever taking the revenge they supposedly long for. This is because the psalmists are not writing about action they will take, but about action they are trusting God to take. In light of this understanding, this passage actually provides support for the harmony of the imprecatory psalms with the rest of Scripture.

The Old Testament is not alone in calling down curses on enemies. The apostle Paul says in Galatians 1:8, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!” This New Testament curse is just as much an imprecation as the examples in the Psalms. It seems the only reason this verse is not

questioned is that it does not use the same vivid, shocking descriptions of physical violence the imprecatory psalms do. However, if Paul is asking for these preachers of another gospel to be damned to hell, which is really the more disturbing punishment?

Another interesting New Testament parallel to the imprecatory psalms comes in Revelation 6:10. The saints in heaven, where of course there is no sin, cry out to God, “How long, Sovereign Lord, before you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?” Clearly, wishing for God’s judgment on the wicked and praying for that judgment are consistent with New Testament theology.

Jesus himself uses imprecatory language throughout the New Testament, along with other New Testament authors. Daniel Nehrbass has compiled a full list of imprecations in the New Testament which is attached in the appendix of this paper. However, one example is Jesus’ words in Matthew 26:24, “But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.”

Finally, the greatest proof for the acceptance of these psalms comes from the fact that the New Testament quotes them. Psalms 35 and 109 are each quoted once in the New Testament,¹⁸ while Psalm 69 is quoted eight times.¹⁹ These three psalms are clearly attested as inspired, and thus there is no reason to exclude the other six imprecatory psalms.

The question of how to use these psalms still remains, however. Are these imprecatory prayers descriptive or prescriptive? Throughout Scripture there are stories of people dealing with anger that are simply descriptive and are not meant to be emulated. Daniel Nehrbass uses the example of Samson. He explains,

Samson killed thirty Philistines in order to pay off a bet, but there is no ethical evaluation of his action. The Bible does not say ‘that was wrong and selfish’ or ‘you shouldn’t pay

¹⁸ Ps. 35:19 is quoted in John 15:25, and Ps. 109:8 is quoted in Acts 1:20.

¹⁹ Jn 15:25, Jn 2:17, Rom 15:3, Mt 27:48, Mk 15:36, Jn 19:28-29, Rom 11:9-10, Ac 1:20.

off your bets in that way.’ Nor does it say ‘God was pleased’ or ‘the Philistines deserved it.’ The ethical commentary is lacking because the primary purpose of the narrative is to tell the story—to describe what happened.²⁰

So, on which end of the spectrum do the imprecatory psalms fall? The psalms are neither descriptive stories nor prescriptive commands. It seems they fall somewhere in the middle. They are not a categorical command saying, “You must pray using these words.” However, it is clear from their references throughout Scripture that they do serve as a model by which Christians can structure their prayers. For this reason, it seems the psalms are in the middle of the spectrum between descriptive and prescriptive. Scripture is not commanding that Christians must always use this type of prayer against their enemies, but it is putting forth these prayers as acceptable models. Therefore, the imprecatory psalms must be regarded as useful for believers even in the modern day.

After establishing the validity and usefulness of these psalms, there are still several steps that must be taken to understand them properly. Erich Zenger proposes that an important step in proper understanding of the imprecatory psalms is to see God as a God who intervenes in human events. Zenger proposes that the modern Christianity has limited its theology and thus forgotten to teach God as a God who is active in the present world.²¹ Jamie Grant summarized Zenger’s point well,

The imprecations force us to ask ourselves a series of questions: Do we really believe in a God who actually intervenes in the events of human history? One who intervenes to declare wrong that which is wrong and right that which is right? Or is our faith limited to questions of personal salvation and only eschatological judgment? The psalmist clearly believes in an interventionist God.²²

²⁰ Nehrbass, 82.

²¹ Zenger, 76-80.

²² Jamie Grant, “Crisis, Cursing and the Christian: Reading Imprecatory Psalms in the Twenty-First Century,” *Foundations: An International Journal of Evangelical Theology* 74 (March 2018), 7

While this idea of a limited theology may be more accurate in some church bodies than others, it is nonetheless an interesting starting point. When teaching these psalms, it is important to first establish the fact that God does hear and act on the prayers of his people.

A related point is the modern view of evil. Peter White points out that Africa is one place in the world where imprecatory prayer is increasing. He attributes this to several factors, one of which is the belief in evil spirits, ghosts, and curses in the native religion. When Africans became Christians, they did not completely leave these beliefs behind.²³ While some African Christians border on superstition, there may be some value in their attention to evil spirits. It is often said that the devil's greatest trick is to convince people that he does not exist. Perhaps the reluctance to pray the imprecatory psalms is the reluctance to admit that evil in the world is not simply caused by random chance or by a mentally ill man who chose of his own free will to walk into a school and open fire, but is caused by Satan actively working in our world.

When twenty first century Christians see God as a God who actively intervenes in the events of this world and see evil as the effect of Satan actively trying to draw people away from God, they will begin to understand the need for imprecatory prayer. They will see that the evil in this world is not only detestable to them but also to God. In fact, it is a direct attack on God's desire for his creation. In this way, imprecatory prayers can be understood as believers asking God to get rid of the evil in the world, knowing that God is just as disgusted with it as they are.

Perhaps, though, the real problem is not the underestimation of evil forces, but the relative lack of evil in the lives of twenty-first century American Christians. Because of the comfort in which we Americans live our lives in this country, is it not possible that we have become apathetic toward all the evil that is going on in the rest of the world? Zenger writes that

²³ Peter White, "Causes for the Upsurge of Imprecatory Prayer in Contemporary African Christian Churches," *American Journal of Biblical Theology* 13(32), 3-4.

the “shrill tones... serve to shock Christianity out of [its] well-regulated slumber,” and are meant to “threaten our ambivalence towards injustice.”²⁴ In other words, it is not that there are fewer problems in the world today than there were in the days of David, but today many problems are simply far enough away that Christians in America feel they do not have to worry about them. Meanwhile, there are evils occurring in America of which Christians may have become ignorant. One example is abortion. The battle over abortion has been going on for decades, and it is possible that Christians may have become numb to the shock they once felt concerning the evil practice of killing unborn babies.

Daniel Nehrbass agrees with Zenger’s proposition that the imprecatory psalms call for Christians to take notice of the evil in the world: “Perhaps the reason we see these psalms as incongruent with modern worship services is that we are privileged to be little acquainted with suffering and oppression. But to deny these psalms is to deny the daily suffering and oppression many others endure.”²⁵ When Christians become aware of evil, specifically evil that is an assault on God himself, they are right to become angry.

Anger is often seen as a negative, sinful emotion; however, it is one of the most spoken of emotions in the Bible. Lytta Bassett examines the concept of righteous anger at length in her work, *Holy Anger*. She writes, “Anger is one of the most frequently mentioned divine emotions in the Hebrew Bible, making it much more a feature of God than of human beings.”²⁶ Of course what makes God’s anger different from that of humans is that he is holy, and humans are not. However, this is not to say that anger cannot be justified on the part of humans. When it concerns God’s reputation, anger is justified, even healthy. Thus, it is clear that imprecatory prayer is

²⁴ Zenger, 21.

²⁵ Nehrbass, 113.

²⁶ Lytta Bassett, *Holy Anger* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 22.

useful for the Christian, as long as the anger is not coming from a place of personal offense, but offense against God.

The next guideline to a proper understanding of the imprecatory psalms is understanding their purpose. In nearly all of the imprecatory psalms, there is a mention of God's name being praised because of his judgment and wrath coming upon the wicked. For example, in Psalm 35:6,8 David prays, "may their path be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them...May ruin overtake them by surprise—may the net they hid entangle them, may they fall into the pit, to their ruin." However, David goes on to say at the end of the psalm in vv. 27-28, "May those who delight in my vindication shout for joy and gladness; may they always say, 'The LORD be exalted, who delights in the well-being of his servant. My tongue will proclaim your righteousness, your praises all day long.'" The purpose of David's prayer is not to satisfy his own desire for revenge but to bring praise to God's name.

When God acts in judgment against the wicked, it serves as a blessing to the righteous. God's acts of judgment are an answer to cries such as, "How long LORD, will the wicked, how long will the wicked be jubilant?" (Ps 94:3) In punishing the wicked, God is intervening in the world, showing the outcome of the ways of the wicked. God does not always act in this way, since the wicked will ultimately be judged on the Last Day by being damned to hell, but these acts of God serve as a blessing to his believers on earth.

The righteous will find comfort in the destruction not because they delight in seeing such people suffer, but because God is acting according to his nature revealed in his Word. David speaks in this way in Psalm 58. David asks in verse 8, "May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along, like a stillborn child that never sees the sun." He then explains the affect this

has on the righteous in verse 11, “Then people will say, ‘Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth.’”

Another desired consequence of imprecatory psalms is the salvation of the wicked. While there are imprecatory psalms that ask, “May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous,” (Ps. 69:28) there are other instances of the psalmist seeking the salvation of his enemies. An example of this comes in Psalm 83:13-16, “Make them like tumbleweed, my God, like chaff before the wind. As fire consumes the forest or a flame sets the mountains ablaze, so pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your storm. Cover their faces with shame, LORD, so that they will seek your name.” It is clear that the psalmist has a purpose of seeking his enemies’ salvation in this instance. He sees the wicked set in their evil ways and realizes their pride; therefore, he prays that they would be covered in shame. In this way, the psalmist’s hope is that the wicked would be cut to the heart by the law and be forced to look to God for salvation. When the imprecatory psalms are seen in light of their purpose, they become much easier to understand. The psalmists are praying first that their enemies would seek God, then asking for them to be punished if they persist in their wickedness.

Closely tied to the psalmist’s purpose is his attitude. This is another important consideration in properly interpreting the imprecatory psalms. It is vital to notice that in the imprecatory psalms, there is never any action on the part of the psalmist. The psalmists are always asking God to punish their enemies. Erich Zenger explains this well, “When those who pray call to their God as a righteous judge they avert vengeance from themselves. They appeal to a God who, as a God of justice, considers, decides, and punishes, this last not out of a pleasure in punishment but in order to restore and defend the damaged order of law.”²⁷

²⁷ Zenger, 25.

Proper interpretation of the imprecatory psalms begins with the doctrine of inspiration. When the psalms are viewed as inspired and interpreted in light of other passages in God's Word, it becomes clear that they are both inspired and useful. By examining the purpose and attitude of the psalmist, these psalms are shown not to be sinful, hate-filled wishes for vengeance on the wicked but appeals to God's justice. Their purpose is not to achieve personal vengeance but to achieve the praise of God, the comfort of the righteous, and the repentance of the wicked. When viewed in this light, the interpretation of the imprecatory psalms becomes much clearer.

Examination of Four Imprecatory Psalms

The guidelines above serve as general rules when interpreting any imprecatory psalm. In order to solidify these guidelines and provide examples of proper interpretation, this section will examine four imprecatory psalms in more detail. These four psalms each have a different background and therefore a different kind of enemy in mind, making each interpretation unique. Psalm 58 is a psalm of David written against unjust rulers. Psalm 69 is a messianic psalm which foreshadows Jesus' words on the cross spoken against the enemies who have put him there. Psalm 109 is another psalm of David, but this time it is written against one personal enemy in particular. Finally, Psalm 137 is a curse against the captors of Israel written in captivity. These psalms therefore encompass all the types of enemies against whom Christians might be moved to pray.

Psalm 58: A Societal Enemy

Throughout history there have been countless examples of corrupt government. While every government is corrupt to some degree, some governments stand out in their oppression of

the weak and their injustice toward certain groups of people. Christians are commanded to obey their governing authorities and honor them as God's representatives (Rom 13:1), but they are also ordered to stand up for the oppressed and afflicted (Prov 31:8-9).

In David's day, he saw rulers who were not governing for the best interest of their subjects, but for their own personal gain. As a man after God's own heart, David was moved to speak out against this injustice. In this psalm, he does just that. He writes, "Do you rulers indeed speak justly? Do you judge people with equity? No. in your heart you devise injustice, and your hands mete out violence on the earth" (Ps 58:1-2). David does not mention these unjust rulers by name, but two possible examples during his lifetime would be Saul and Absalom. This psalm could easily have been written about either one. It is not necessary to know which one David had in mind, because his words apply to both situations, as well as to any situation in which believers are subject to unjust rulers.

David continues his description of these rulers in verses four and five, comparing them to deaf snakes who "will not heed the tune of the charmer, however skillful the enchanter may be." David's depiction of these rulers as venomous snakes portrays both their danger to others and their ignorance of their own wrongdoing. In his commentary on the psalms, John Brug draws a connection to rulers such as Absalom, Mussolini, and Hitler. He says, "Believing in their own propaganda, they raced full speed ahead down the road to destruction."²⁸

The picture of deaf snakes shows that these men have brought the curse of God upon themselves by ignoring calls to repentance. They have stopped up their ears so as not to hear the warnings of those who would attempt to point out the error of their ways. The verbs שָׁמַעַתְּ in verse four and יִשְׁמַעַתְּ in verse five (verses five and six in the Hebrew text) are imperfect, denoting the ongoing characteristic of their action. Because of this continual, ongoing wickedness, these men

²⁸ Brug, vol. I, 556.

have become subject to God's wrath. David is not crying out because of a single act of wickedness, but because of a repeated pattern of injustice. This is important to remember as David begins to call down curses on these rulers.

“Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; LORD, tear out the fangs of those lions! Let them vanish like water that flows away; when they draw the bow, let their arrows fall short. May they be like a slug that melts away as it moves along, like a stillborn child that never sees the sun” (Ps. 58:6-8). Without context these words seem cruel and diabolical, but in the context of persistently oppressive governance, they are not at all out of place. David is praying against these men not just for his own sake, but also for the sake of the nation. The rulers of the people of Israel were supposed to be representing God's name to the Israelites as well as the surrounding nations. David was concerned because these wicked rulers were bringing dishonor to the very name of God. For this reason, he is justified in praying such violent things against them.

Praying such a prayer would have been no easy task. It takes courage to speak out against government, as Calvin notes, “To pray that this solid and prodigious opposition should melt down and disappear evidenced no small degree of courage, and the event could only appear credible to one who had learnt to exalt the power of God above all intervening obstacles.”²⁹ Calvin here points out another characteristic of imprecatory prayer. These words of David can come only from a heart that trusts God to deal with the evildoer in whatever way he sees fit. David does not take matters into his own hands, rather he puts them into the hands of the almighty God. When believers are subject to oppressive rulers, they must do the same.

Interestingly though, even after the curses David has uttered against these rulers, he does not ask for them to be completely destroyed. Instead he asks that they remain alive so that the people of Israel will not forget what happens to those who do wicked (Ps 58:10-11). David

²⁹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 374.

knows that God can use even unjust rulers for his purposes. They will serve as an example to the nations of the judgment that comes upon those who dishonor God's name.

The psalm ends by providing a sharp contrast between these wicked representatives of God and God himself. David concludes, "But I will sing of your strength, in the morning I will sing of your love; for you are my fortress, my refuge in times of trouble. You are my strength, I sing praise to you; you, God, are my fortress, my God on whom I can rely" (Ps. 58:16-17). While the rulers in David's day were characterized by their hatred and wickedness toward the weak, David reminds the people who would sing his psalm that the LORD is characterized not only by his strength, but also by his רַחֲמָיו , his unfailing love.

Through David's psalm, God reminds his people that he governs the nations, even when unjust rulers occupy the throne. David's ultimate goal in writing this imprecatory psalm is to remind believers of that fact. By showing God's strong judgment on the wicked and proclaiming his love, David intends to lead people to praise God. This praise will come when the righteous see that God is indeed concerned with justice. While rulers may set themselves up as gods in this life, the final judgment belongs to God, the ruler who always speaks justly and judges people with equity.

Psalm 69: Enemies of the Messiah

Of the four psalms in this section, Psalm 69 is the easiest to explain to those who are troubled by the thought of imprecatory prayer. It is thoroughly messianic, and thus the righteous anger displayed in this psalm seems fitting. Because Jesus is innocent, most interpreters have no problems with the imprecatory language. There are, however, several questions of interpretation that should not be overlooked.

The first question an interpreter of this psalm must answer is whether the whole thing truly is messianic. This would be an easy answer were it not for verse 5: “You, God, know my folly; my guilt is not hidden from you.” How can it be said that this psalm foreshadows the words of the Messiah when the psalmist speaks of having guilt and folly? At first glance, it seems that these characteristics are not compatible with a messianic interpretation. John Calvin asserts that this verse must not be referring to the Messiah, but only to David.³⁰ However, the idea of Christ being guilty in God’s sight is not without parallel in Scripture. Isaiah 53:6 speaks of the Messiah carrying mankind’s iniquity, and in the New Testament, Paul says that Christ became sin for human beings (2 Cor 5:21). Therefore this verse should not get in the way of interpreting this psalm as messianic.

Much of the rest of the psalm can be explained and interpreted quite easily. Christ cries out to God, making it known that his enemies hate him and have sought to destroy him without cause. It is not hard to see the parallel in the Gospels. However, another problem arises in verses 22-28. The messianic interpretation of this psalm seems to clash with the Gospel of Luke. In Luke 23:34, Jesus prays on behalf of his enemies, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” And yet in these verses of Psalm 69, Jesus prays for their names to be blotted from the book of life, for them not to be listed among the righteous (69:28). So which is it? Did Jesus pray for or against the enemies who put him on the cross?

The answer, of course, is both. Scripture says that he prayed for the forgiveness of his enemies, and yet it also says in this psalm that he prayed for God to curse them. The two are not mutually exclusive, in fact, they are both parts of God’s character and therefore Jesus’ character. Jesus had no doubt prayed many times that Judas would not betray him, yet he knew after Judas left the upper room that Satan had entered him (Jn 13:27). Judas had turned his back on Jesus

³⁰ Calvin, 65.

and had therefore rejected the only one who could save him from the sin he was about to commit. While Jesus' love for Judas still remained, Judas had rejected him and his love.

Therefore all that was left for Judas was the curse of the law.

Psalm 69 is an incredibly important imprecatory psalm. Not only does it show that Christ himself prayed curses on his enemies, but it also gives an example of how he went about praying those curses. In this example, what was an interpretive problem becomes a template for dealing with enemies. Jesus shows that imprecatory prayers are compatible with prayers for the forgiveness of enemies. So often scholars quote Jesus' command to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:44) as proof that Christians cannot and should not pray the imprecatory psalms. Yet they ignore the fact that Scripture clearly presents Jesus both praying for and praying against his enemies.

Obviously, for Jesus, the love and concern for his enemies came first. Jesus wants all to be saved (1 Tim 2:4), so he commands his followers to pray for their enemies, that they too may be saved. However, when Jesus' enemies rejected him to the point of hardening their hearts, he could not let that stand. His justice would not allow him to overlook such rejection, so he prayed that God would blot their names from the book of life. In doing so, he was showing that such cursing of God's enemies is valid and in line with God's will.

Unlike Jesus, however, believers are not able to know the hearts of their enemies. They are unable to see whether their enemies have hardened their hearts or not. For this reason, believers' imprecatory prayers must always be conditional. They will seek first that the enemies come to a knowledge of the truth and so change their ways. But then, they pray, if that does not happen, let them be under God's curse for what they have done. In this way believers can

understand and apply Psalm 69 as a model of the proper attitude toward enemies, wishing first for conversion and repentance, then, if that does not happen, for their judgment.

Psalm 109: A Personal Enemy

The two preceding psalms have shown a citizen speaking out against a corrupt government and the Messiah speaking in righteous anger against those who are putting him to death. These are situations in which most people would agree that anger is justified. However, Psalm 109 is a curse of David against a particular human enemy. Because it is so personal, many have misinterpreted it. C.S. Lewis called it “as unabashed a hymn of hate as was ever written.”³¹ Martin Luther, meanwhile, interprets the whole psalm as a reference to Judas and the Jews who plotted to kill Jesus, refusing to see it as David’s words spoken against his own personal enemy. When it comes to dealing with a personal enemy, many more people have a problem with imprecatory language. The importance of this psalm lies in the fact that the most common kind of enemy is a personal one. The psalmist gives an example of how to deal with an enemy who is persistently wicked.

Again, the specific enemy against whom David prays this psalm is not known. The opening verses switch back and forth between speaking of a singular enemy and plural enemies. Eventually, though, David settles into using the singular. This probably means that there are many people involved in the plot against David, but there is one of whom David is thinking specifically. The enemies are also people close to David, based on verse 4, where David says, “In return for my friendship they accuse me.” David’s grief and anger toward these enemies is deepened by the fact that he considers them his friends. Brug considers it likely that David had Ahithophel in mind when he prayed this psalm. Ahithophel had been the advisor to the throne in

³¹ Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (London: William Collins, 2017), 118.

Israel when David was king, and he remained in that position when Absalom took control of the nation. Perhaps the most striking example of Ahithophel's wickedness was his advice to Absalom to sleep with his father's concubines on the roof of the palace (2 Sam 16:21-22). It is in the face of such betrayal that this psalm is prayed.³²

The first thing to notice about David's prayer against his enemy is that he is handing over his anger to God. He asks God to deal with him. In this way David avoids acting out in vengeance. Calvin summarizes David's attitude well, "When he was attacked in a cruel and hostile manner, he did not betake himself to such unlawful means as the rendering of evil for evil, but committed himself into the hand of God, fully satisfied that he alone could guard him from all of it."³³ This is the attitude believers must have when attacked unjustly. They will not act hastily or attempt to get revenge on their enemies by repaying evil with evil. Instead they will commit their case to God, knowing that he will judge rightly and finally on the matter.

The imprecations run from vv. 6-20, and they are not limited to the man himself. Instead, David includes the man's immediate family: "May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes...May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the LORD; may the sin of his mother never be blotted out. May their sins always remain before the LORD, that he may blot out their name from the earth." While these curses seem harsh at first, they are not out of line with God's covenant. He told the Israelites at Mount Sinai that he punishes the children of the wicked to the third and fourth generation (Ex 20:5). This is one of many reasons that sin is so serious. It affects not only the sinner, but also his children.

³² Since this psalm is quoted in reference to Judas in Acts 1:20, it is fitting to note that this observation applies as a prophetic reference to Judas as well. Judas was one of Jesus' closest companions on earth. He was one of the twelve disciples, and yet he handed Jesus over to be killed.

³³ Calvin, 272.

Another point to consider regarding the punishment of the children of the wicked is the fact that a certain degree of punishment is not uncommon even in society today. A criminal who is put to death for his crimes leaves his children fatherless and his wife a widow. Even when a criminal is incarcerated, his family suffers the penalty for his actions by being left without him while he is in prison.³⁴ Therefore David is not wishing bad fortune upon his enemy's family simply for the sake of making them suffer, rather he is acknowledging that they will bear the consequences of the wicked man's actions. With this punishment coming upon their close family member, the hope would be that these people realize the error of his ways and do not follow his example.

As is the case in the psalms examined above, David states that the evildoer brought his punishment on himself. He explains, "He loved to pronounce a curse— may it come back on him. He found no pleasure in blessing— may it be far from him. He wore cursing as his garment; it entered into his body like water, into his bones like oil" (Ps 109:17-18). Luther makes the point that the pictures of putting on cursing as a garment and cursing entering into his body like water show that this man's evil was a part of his daily routine.³⁵ He habitually cursed others and wished evil on them, so now he will receive the consequence that action brings with it.

David ends his curse and switches gears dramatically in verse 21. As is characteristic of the imprecatory psalms, David concludes his cursing psalm with the hope that God will be praised for his actions of judgment on the wicked. David promises, "With my mouth I will greatly extol the LORD, in the great throng of worshipers I will praise him" (Ps. 109:30). The actions of God on David's behalf will not be something David sees and rejoices in privately. Instead he will praise God publicly, making it known to other believers what God has done for

³⁴ John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 3: Psalms 90-150* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 281.

³⁵ Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, Volume 14: Selected Psalms III* (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1958), 268.

him. Throughout the imprecatory psalms, this is a major theme. When God delivers the oppressed and afflicted, his people will see it and be reminded that God is concerned with the needs of his people and intervenes powerfully on their behalf. Seeing this, God's people are moved to make their own needs known to God, trusting that he will stand at their right hand to save their lives from those who would condemn them (Ps 109:31).

Psalm 137: A National Enemy

Psalm 137 is perhaps the most famous, or infamous, of the imprecatory psalms, depending on the interpreter's point of view. It has been called "the psalm of violence par excellence."³⁶ Unlike the above psalms, the author is not named. The psalm is set in Babylon during the captivity of Judah. During the captivity, the Israelites were not able to worship God in the way he commanded. Old Testament worship was inseparably tied to the temple in Jerusalem, and without that temple the Israelites were unable to offer sacrifices to God. It is in this context that the Babylonians, perhaps mockingly, ask the psalm writer and his companions to sing them one of the songs of Zion (Ps 137:3). This caused the psalmist to weep and pray the curses that follow.

The imprecations in this psalm begin not with the Babylonians, but with the Edomites. The psalmist asks simply that God remember what they did, namely, stand by and encourage the wickedness of the Babylonians. There is no specific curse wished upon the Edomites, but the psalmist instead trusts that when God remembers their complicity in the evil done to Jerusalem, he will punish them on the last day.

When it comes to the Babylonians, however, the psalmist does not mince words. "Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what

³⁶ Zenger, 46.

you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks” (Ps 137:8-9). This curse is shockingly violent, but it is based on the actions of the Babylonians when they conquered Jerusalem. The psalmist himself mentions that this punishment is “according to what you have done to us” (Ps 137:8), but there is more evidence of the Babylonians’ brutality. In 2 Kings 25:7, Zedekiah’s two sons are murdered before his eyes immediately before his eyes are gouged out. Calvin also notes that Homer mentioned this practice was not uncommon in ancient times as a means of completely destroying the conquered nation.³⁷

An interesting facet to this imprecatory psalm is the parallel language elsewhere in Scripture. In Isaiah 13:16, God speaks a prophecy against Babylon in words that are almost identical to those here. It is quite possible that the psalmist heard these words of Isaiah and clung to the promise God had made to repay the Babylonians for the evil they had done to Jerusalem. Given this context, it could be said that the wish for the babies of Babylon to be dashed against the rocks is not a personal desire for vengeance, but comes from a heart that clings to God’s promises. Erich Zenger sums up the psalmist’s attitude in Psalm 137 best:

Psalm 137 is not the song of people who have the power to effect a violent change in their situation of suffering, nor is it the battle cry of terrorists. Instead, it is an attempt to cling to one's historical identity even when everything is against it. Still more, it is an attempt, in the face of the most profound humiliation and helplessness, to suppress the primitive human lust for violence in one's own heart, by surrendering *everything* to God—a God whose word of judgment is presumed to be so universally just that even those who pray the psalm submit themselves to it.³⁸

Another troubling aspect of this psalm is its abrupt ending. The usual praise for God at the end of the psalm is nowhere to be found. Instead, the curse of the psalmist hangs in the air. Perhaps this is on account of the lack of formal worship life in captivity. It is quite possible that

³⁷ Calvin, 195.

³⁸ Zenger, 48.

this psalm was written more as a personal prayer than a public one. The lack of a heading leaves this a mystery. However, the effect of this abrupt ending is powerful. It shows powerfully and vividly the effects of unforgiven sin. While Americans in the twenty-first century long for a happy ending, there will be none for those who reject God.

PART III: APPLYING THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

Since the time of their writing in the first millennium B.C., the imprecatory psalms have been scarcely used. Compared to the rest of Scripture, the imprecatory psalms seem to be almost completely ignored. However, when these psalms have been used, it has been in the face of brutal violence and oppression. In order to understand how to apply these psalms in a modern context, it will be beneficial first of all to examine how they have been used in the recent past.

For example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer preached a sermon based on Psalm 58 during the time of Nazi control in Germany.³⁹ He used the psalm to pray for God's judgment on the oppressive regime and encouraged his listeners to do the same. Anatoly Shcharansky, a man arrested by the KGB for repeatedly trying to emigrate to Israel, read through the entire book of psalms multiple times while imprisoned in a Soviet gulag. He undoubtedly could appreciate the language of the imprecatory psalms in his situation. He wrote in a letter, "What does this give me? Gradually, my feeling of great loss and sorrow changed to one of bright hopes."⁴⁰

In a more modern context, the imprecatory psalms have been used far more in Africa than they have been here in the United States. The African Christian Church has used the imprecatory psalms to give its people a way to pray against the forces of evil around them. Because of the native African religion, many African Christians are still wary of spirits and ghosts haunting them or causing them harm. In order to give these Christians a way of fighting against these evil forces without participating in witchcraft or the false religion of the natives, the African Christian church has encouraged its members to pray the imprecatory psalms. In this way the Church recognizes the danger of the witchcraft involved in this religion and empowers its members to fight against such evil forces by asking for God's help against them in prayer.

³⁹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Meditations on Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 54-66.

⁴⁰ Philip Yancey, "Daily Riches: When God Seems Absent." RicherByFar.com, <https://richerbyfar.com/tag/philip-yancey-the-bible-jesus-read/>.

The modern enemy that comes to mind most readily for twenty-first century Americans is ISIS. The terrorist group regularly persecutes and executes Christians. This has led many to call for Christians to pray imprecatory psalms against them.⁴¹ This certainly seems to be an appropriate use of imprecatory prayer and will be discussed further below.

The most difficult part of applying imprecatory psalms is deciding whether a given situation calls for imprecatory prayer. Such prayers should not be used flippantly. For example, a Christian should not rush straight to imprecatory prayer against a driver who cuts him off on the highway. How then are Christians to know which situations call for imprecatory prayer and which do not? How can Christians pray these psalms without giving into the temptation of becoming judgmental and self-righteous? These are the questions a pastor should expect from his people on the topic of the imprecatory psalms. In order to answer them, the pastor must not hide from the imprecatory psalms and hope he never has to address them. Instead, he should educate his people by explaining these psalms in Bible class or possibly even from the pulpit. This section will examine several ways to address the imprecatory psalms publicly and encourage their use privately in the proper situations.

One reason the imprecatory psalms have gone largely unnoticed in WELS congregations is the fact that they are not included in the lectionary or the Christian Worship hymnal.⁴² This will not be the case in the new *Psalter* coming out in 2020 as a part of the Hymnal Project. This book will include settings for all 150 psalms, as well as devotional readings to accompany them. In the *Psalter*, even the imprecatory verses will be included, making it far more likely that WELS pastors will have to answer questions about them from their congregation. For this

⁴¹ Carlton Wynne, "ISIS and the Imprecatory Psalms" Reformation21.org, <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2015/02/isis-and-the-imprecatory-psalm.php>.

⁴² Of the psalms listed above as imprecatory, only Psalm 139 is included in Christian Worship; however, the imprecatory verses have been omitted.

reason, a pastor should take the challenge of these psalms head on and seek to explain them properly to his congregation.

Guidelines for Applying Imprecatory Psalms

Acknowledge your own sinfulness

The first step in being able to pray an imprecatory prayer is to acknowledge the sinfulness of one's own heart. In order to avoid a self-righteous praying of the imprecatory prayers, a person must realize that he is not any less deserving of God's punishment than the person he is praying against. This was the case for David and the other psalmists as well. Saying the prayers of the psalmists were righteous and inspired does not necessarily mean that they never harbored sinful thoughts toward their enemies. They were sinful human beings, so it is quite likely that there were times when their anger toward their enemies was not righteous. However, the imprecatory psalms show them letting go of that anger in a healthy way and surrendering vengeance to God.

In order to pray these prayers, believers must look into their own hearts and recognize their sins of anger. Part of praying an imprecatory prayer is letting go of that anger by handing it over to God. This will be the fruit of repentance once the sin of anger has been confessed and the believer has been reminded of the forgiveness won for him in Christ. Believers will then be able to reexamine the situation and may be led to let go of their anger completely by forgiving their enemy.

Acknowledging one's own part in the matter causes the believer to stop and think about whether he played a role in what happened. If the believer finds that he himself is partially

responsible for what happened, he may realize that imprecatory prayer is not necessary. This humility is necessary in order to apply imprecatory psalms properly. If a believer acknowledges his own shortcomings and still finds that his enemy is oppressing him without reason, he may continue with the process of deciding whether imprecatory prayer is appropriate.

Be Concerned for God's Reputation

Throughout the imprecatory psalms, the psalmists' appeals are made to God, not only because he is the one with the power to crush the enemy, but also because it is his name that is being defamed by the enemy. Whenever humans are attacked, God is concerned. In Genesis 1, God shows that mankind is the crown of his creation. Human beings, more than anything else in the world, were made to display and proclaim the glory of God. Therefore, when people are murdered or treated poorly, God is always concerned. God is concerned because the oppressors are setting themselves up as gods. They are taking another person's life into their hands, when God is the one who determines mankind's days (Ps 139:16).

In this way, violence and murder are assaults on the very character and reputation of God. They are a destruction of the creation God intended for good. When Christians realize this, they will be more likely to speak out against evil. Brug is of the opinion that the imprecatory psalms would be used far more if people had the same hatred for sin that God has, "It is not that the character of these psalms is too low. It is that our characters are not high enough to understand and to use such psalms. We do not have enough awe for holiness or enough dread of sin to be so distressed by sin that we would take such a vehement stand against it."⁴³

This is another area in which the application of the imprecatory psalms becomes difficult. How can Christians be sure that their anger is justified? How can they be sure that they are not

⁴³ John F. Brug, *A Commentary on Psalms 73-150* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2004), 286.

praying for selfish reasons? The answer is that everything humans do is tainted by sin, but if a Christian can confidently say that his anger is caused by an assault on the reputation of God, his anger is justified. This kind of assault on God's reputation can come in many different forms, and ultimately, it is up to the believer to decide whether or not an action constitutes an attack on God's name.

Let God Deal with Your Enemy

It has already been stated above that the imprecatory psalms are directed at particularly wicked enemies who have persisted in their evil ways. Calvin describes the kind of evil the psalmists prayed imprecatory prayers against as “excessive wickedness— too marked to escape detestation even amidst the general corruption of mankind.”⁴⁴ In the face of such wickedness, Christians are forced to realize that they must call upon God. This means that Christians will not take action against their enemies on their own. Instead, they will let God deal with their enemy according to his deeds.

How then should Christians pray for their enemies? How does a Christian reconcile the two seemingly opposed examples of the imprecatory psalms and Jesus' command to love even enemies? Since it is God's will that all be saved, the Christian, praying in line with God's will should first pray that his enemy would be converted and recognize the error of his ways. Since Christians are unable to see into the heart of their enemies, they cannot determine when someone has hardened his heart to the point of completely rejecting God. Therefore the first prayer of the Christian is always that his enemy would repent of his evil ways and live.

However, following the example of the imprecatory psalms, the Christian can also rightly pray for the plans of the wicked to be frustrated. While it seems un-Christian to pray for someone

⁴⁴ Calvin, 371.

else to fail, it is not. In doing so, the believer is praying for the well-being of the victims of the wicked. In praying for the plans of the wicked to be frustrated, the believer turns the anger away from the enemy himself and places it on the causes of injustice. This will make it less likely that the one praying will slip into unjust hatred and will remain in righteous anger. Because “as long as the other [person] is hated as an enemy, there is little likelihood of our experiencing truly just hate.”⁴⁵

With these guidelines in mind, believers can pray imprecatory psalms with a clear conscience. While many Christians still might not feel that they have a reason to pray this type of prayer, as mentioned in the introduction to this paper, perhaps the day is drawing nearer that more Americans will be moved to pray in this way. It is the pastor’s responsibility to teach his people the proper method of applying these psalms.

Applications to the Modern Congregation

Perhaps the most natural way to address these psalms would be in Bible class. Because of the large amount of explanation that is required in order to understand these psalms properly, it would be difficult, though not impossible, to preach on them from the pulpit. The Bible class setting would give the members of the congregation ample opportunity to ask for clarification about the difficult points of these psalms.

While not every person in Bible class will feel they have a specific situation where they could pray an imprecatory prayer, there would still be value for all involved. If there is not a specific situation for application, there is still value in appropriation. The imprecatory psalms lead the believer to understand more thoroughly God’s hatred of sin, God’s justice, and God’s love. These psalms also provide a template for Christians when they are faced with anger toward

⁴⁵ David Augsburger, *Hate-Work* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 164.

their enemies. After studying these psalms, they will better understand how they are to act toward their enemies. They will be taught to pray first for their enemy's conversion, but secondarily for his plans to be frustrated and his sin to be punished.

Teaching the imprecatory psalms will also guard against the common objection to Christianity that there cannot be a good God in such a bad world. According to a 2018 study done by Barna, 30% of non-Christian members of Generation Z stated that their biggest barrier to faith was, "I have a hard time believing that a good God would allow so much evil or suffering in the world."⁴⁶ This problem of theodicy has been around since the Old Testament times.

Related to the imprecatory psalms are the psalms of lament. In these psalms, the psalmists cry out, asking God, "How long LORD, will the wicked, how long will the wicked be jubilant?" (Ps 94:3) The question of theodicy is one believers and unbelievers alike must face. In teaching the imprecatory psalms, the pastor shows his people that God will not let the wicked prosper forever. These psalms teach that God is indeed active in the world today and will judge the wicked for their sins. As mentioned above, this judgment of the wicked serves to comfort Christians and lead them to praise God's name.

Teaching these psalms will also serve to alert Christians of the evil that is going on in the world. Jamie Grant writes,

In a generation of twenty-four-hour news, we have become inured to those atrocities of life that should horrify us to our very core. The imprecations force us, as praying people, to bring the horrors of life before the throne of grace, *as horrors*. There is no need to polish or beautify or make more polite and acceptable that which God sees, and which he sees as tragically gross perversions of his created order. The existence of evil in the world should be heart-breaking to every believer. The psalms of enmity force us to experience that heartbreak in the presence of God rather than apart from him.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ "Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z." Barna.com.

⁴⁷ Grant, 10.

Teaching believers the imprecatory psalms will help them not only become more aware of the injustices in the world but will also cause them to turn to God for help in the face of such injustice. In this way, believers will see that God is not absent in a wicked world, rather he is actively at work. Instead of shying away from the problem of wickedness in this world, pastors should alert their people to the horrors of sin and help them see what God does and will do to destroy such wickedness.

While it would be more challenging than teaching these psalms in Bible class, it would also be possible to preach on the imprecatory psalms. Daniel Michael Nehrbass includes five sample sermons on the imprecatory psalms as a template.⁴⁸ While these sermons are lacking in proper distinction between Law and Gospel in some places, they nonetheless provide a useful resource for pastors seeking to preach on the imprecatory psalms. The benefits to preaching these psalms are the same as those listed for teaching them in Bible class, although it is still true that Bible class would probably be the more appropriate setting.

There has also been research in the area of applying the imprecatory psalms to pastoral counseling. The argument is that these psalms provide a cathartic release of anger for victims of great trauma. An in-depth study of the psychological benefits of praying the imprecatory psalms in counseling is not possible within the limitations of this paper, but it is at least a possibility that pastors could consider. Nehrbass addresses the issue in his book, and his conclusion is that there has not been enough research done on the topic to make a firm statement on their value in counseling. He admits that the psychological value of catharsis has been debated among psychological scholars. He concludes, “If there is any value to the idea that the psalms provide a catharsis, it is that imprecatory prayer helps us overcome denial of our anger.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Nehrbass, 174-200.

⁴⁹ Nehrbass, 158.

Dominic D. Hankle wrote an article on the topic of imprecatory psalms in Christian counseling as well. He concluded that there is both a danger and a possible benefit to the use of these psalms:

The imprecatory psalms can become a very powerful therapeutic tool in a Christian counseling setting whether they are introduced by the therapist or by the client. Without a theologically disciplined approach there is always the risk that the client will use them to hold on to anger causing a cognitive dissonance with the message of love, forgiveness and redemption found in other parts of Scripture. By being grounded in good solid theological knowledge as well as having strong sensitivity to the psychological expression of negative emotion, the use of the imprecatory psalms can be quite therapeutic as well as a powerful means for self-understanding and healing.⁵⁰

While the use of the imprecatory psalms in counseling remains in question, the findings of the scholars above show that these psalms can be valuable in the private devotional life of a Christian. As Hankle mentioned above, there is a certain amount of theological understanding required so that these psalms are not misused. For this reason, a pastor should not recommend these psalms to a member who may not be able to handle the difficult theological concepts they present. However, in the right setting, they can be valuable, as they provide the Christian with a tool for dealing with anger by placing it in the hands of God.

⁵⁰ Hankle, 279.

CONCLUSION

The imprecatory psalms have long been seen as a skeleton in the Christian church's closet. At first glance, they seem to be incompatible with other parts of Scripture that tell Christians to love their enemies. For centuries, the church did little to combat this belief. In recent years, though, the imprecatory psalms have been brought out into the light and acknowledged. The church does not need to hide from the apparent problem of the imprecatory psalms. As outlined above, there are many incorrect interpretations of these psalms, and it is the duty of the Christian church to make sure that these psalms are properly interpreted.

Because these psalms are part of God's inspired Word, Christians start with the presupposition that these are valid prayers. When examined in light of other passages in both the Old and New Testaments, these psalms are found to be compatible with the rest of Scripture. Not only that, but these psalms also paint a vivid picture of God's hatred of sin, his justice, and his love for his people. On the part of the one praying, there is an attitude of humble trust. The psalmist pleads his case to God and hands over all rights to take action against his enemy. This is an extremely healthy way of dealing with anger because it avoids vengeful hatred and instead trusts God to deal with the wicked. Finally, these psalms also show that God's judgment on the wicked is a reason for believers to take comfort and to praise God's name.

When properly interpreted, these psalms can be hugely beneficial to modern congregations. In an age where fresh horrors arrive in the news feed every day, Christians long for an answer to the wickedness in the world. These psalms are becoming more and more applicable to Christians in twenty-first century America. They could be used to pray against ISIS, school shooters, corrupt politicians, and a host of other enemies of God. While there is a

specific set of circumstances in which these psalms are applicable, they are nonetheless valuable for Christians struggling with doubts caused by the evil in this world.

In a world that is increasingly intolerant of Christianity, Christians should be prepared to interpret and apply the imprecatory psalms so that they are not alarmed by the wickedness in the world around them. As the end draws nearer, Jesus has told his followers that the evil on earth will only increase. With the help of the imprecatory psalms, Christians will not give in to the temptation to repay evil with evil, but will instead entrust themselves to God. At the last day, they will receive the reward of eternal bliss in heaven won for them by Christ's life, death and resurrection while the wicked will depart to eternal punishment. On that day, God's people will say with the psalmist, "Surely the righteous still are rewarded; surely there is a God who judges the earth" (Ps. 58:11).

APPENDIX I: TABLE OF NEW TESTAMENT IMPRECATION⁵¹

Curse ⁵²	Speaker
Matthew 11:21-24 – “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”	Jesus
Matthew 12:34 – You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.	Jesus
Luke 13:32 – He replied, “Go tell that fox, ‘I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.’	Jesus
Matthew 23:33-35 – “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Therefore I am sending you prophets and sages and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.	Jesus
Matthew 26:24 – But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born.	Jesus
Acts 23:3 – God will strike you, you whitewashed wall! You sit there to judge me according to the law, yet you yourself violate the law by commanding that I be struck!	Paul
1 Corinthians 16:22 – If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed!	Paul
Galatians 1:8-9 – But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God’s curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God’s curse!	Paul
Galatians 5:12 – As for those agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves!	Paul
2 Timothy 4:14 – Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done.	Paul
James 5:1-6 – Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming on you. Your wealth has rotted, and moths have eaten your clothes. Your gold and silver are corroded. Their corrosion will testify against you and eat your flesh like fire. You have hoarded wealth in the last days. Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered the innocent one, who was not opposing you.	James
Jude 11-13 – Woe to them! They have taken the way of Cain; they have rushed for profit into Balaam’s error; they have been destroyed in Korah’s rebellion. These people are blemishes at your love feasts, eating with you without the slightest qualm—shepherds who feed only themselves. They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind; autumn trees, without fruit and uprooted—twice dead. They are wild waves of the sea, foaming up their shame; wandering stars, for whom blackest darkness has been reserved forever.	Jude
Revelation 6:10 – How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?	John/Saints in heaven

⁵¹ Nehrbass, 138-139.

⁵² Note that Nehrbass has a broader definition of an imprecation than the definition used in this paper.

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