

Imprecatory Psalms

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(Bible quotations are from the NIV.)

Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O LORD, the fangs of the lions!...The righteous will be glad when they are avenged. (Ps. 58:6, 10)

If only you would slay the wicked, O God....Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD....I have nothing but hatred for them; I count them my enemies. (Ps. 139:19–21)

When he is tried, let him be found guilty, and may his prayers condemn him. May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership. 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 no one...take pity on his fatherless children. (Ps. 109:7–10, 12)

“Here and there in the Psalter, like jagged thorns in a chain of roses, there occur certain psalms which express vehement anger and imprecation against enemies and evil-doers. These are known as the “Imprecatory Psalms”.... These [and similar] passages have been a sore perplexity to many a reader.”¹

The quotations above from the psalms are examples of imprecation. An imprecation prays for or invokes a curse or evil on someone. Some entire psalms are labeled as imprecatory: Psalms 35, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137. Many other passages have the same nature.²

Some feel that such psalms and passages throw doubt on divine inspiration of the Old Testament. They cannot reconcile imprecation with our Lord’s injunction to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). They think that imprecations (a) violate human compassion, (b) contradict God’s goodness even to the worst of men, (c) contradict the New Testament teachings of love and forgiveness, and (d) are even “inconsistent with the psalmists’ own profession of ardent trust in God.” Baxter does not share that opinion and concern about biblical imprecations.

Some of the attempts to justify such imprecations have been faulty. Consider the examples in the following table.

¹ J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, LTD, 1951), III, 111. Most of this study is adapted from III:111–118 of Baxter’s six volume work. Except where indicated, non-biblical quotations are from the same pages.

² Some of these shorter imprecatory passages are Psalms 5:10; 6:10; 28:4–5; 31:17–18; 40:14–15; 41:10; 55:9, 15; 70:2–3; 71:13; 79:6, 12; 129:5–8; 139:19–22; 140:9–10; 141:10; 149:7–9. See also Nehemiah 4:4–5.

Faulty Attempts To Justify Biblical Imprecations	
Faulty Explanation	Why It Is Faulty
The imprecations merely declare the future, what will happen.	Many imprecations are not declarative but imperative (“Destroy, O LORD”). This explanation does not account for other factors, such as, wishing evil on the children of the wicked (Ps. 109:10, 12–13; 137:9).
The imprecations belonged only to the old dispensation under the law.	If the attitude is wrong now, it would have been wrong then. Under the law God emphatically required love even for strangers. Furthermore, the same imprecatory attitude is found in the New Testament. The apostle Paul showed it in 2 Tim. 4:14 and Gal. 1:8–9. Martyrs in heaven showed it in Rev. 6:10–11.
The imprecations affect only temporal, not eternal calamities.	Even if that could be proved, the attitude would be the same.

Baxter justifies the imprecations in the psalms in a different way. He begins by arguing that three things about them are right:

- **Their motive.** The imprecations are opposed to the wicked only because they are wicked. They are “against ungodly wicked-doers *as such*.” The first imprecation, in Psalm 5, “gives the key to all those that follow.” Verse 10 shows that David “has identified himself with God against sin, and...hates sin because God hates it.” (See this thought expressed clearly in Psalm 139:21–22, in part quoted above.) In other words, the psalmist’s motive is not jealousy, spite, or ambition—but hatred of evil.
- **Their standpoint.** These imprecations are not personal but theocratic—related to God’s kingdom over Israel. This ties to the motive. As theocratic king, David “knew that he was anointed by God, that he ruled *for* God, and that he was directly *responsible* to God.” In some ways David’s throne was God’s earthly throne. Thus, those opposed to David were opposed to God Himself (e.g., Ps. 59:11; 69:6; 40:9–10). For the same reason David from his death-bed instructed Solomon to punish certain wrong-doers. Even the non-Davidic imprecatory passages in the Psalms (83; 137; 79:6,12; 149:7–9) “are in each case *national* and not personal.”
- **Their spirit.** The spirit of these passages is not wrong. In each case the psalmist had already shown kindness but had been abused: “They repay me evil for good” (see Ps. 35:12; 69:4; 109:5). God’s offer to forgive fits the same pattern. He withdraws it from one who persists in sin and will not repent (Matt. 6:14–15; 18:35). Likewise, a Christian must want to forgive wrongdoers but cannot truly forgive one who refuses to humble himself.³ A corollary is that we can forgive “a wrong *act*” but not condone “a wrong *attitude*.”

³ In passages similar to Luke 17:3–4, we should probably assume the condition clearly stated there: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and **if he repents, forgive him**. If he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘**I repent,**’ forgive him.” It is important to have a forgiving spirit, but we cannot cleanse those who do not want to be cleansed.

The three facts just noted about imprecations point to their real justification. They are right because they reflect God's own attitude. At one and the same time He has two attitudes toward sinners and their sin:

- He loves them and works to save them completely.
- If they refuse His grace, He "hates" them and plans to destroy them.

God's two attitudes toward sinners reflect two aspects of His nature: (a) He is love and (b) He is holy. To us these seem like opposite "poles," but both are true. God's holiness is emphasized in the first part of the Bible, under the "old covenant." His love is emphasized in the last part of the Bible, under the "new covenant."

Consider the fact that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). We have learned this especially through Jesus, who sacrificed Himself for sinners. The plan to do so did not originate with Jesus but with His Father (Rom. 8:32). The Father is also patient with sinners, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

But it is equally true that God is holy. We learn this especially through the covenant at Sinai. That covenant, the law, reveals how holy God is and how heinous and hurtful sin is. Defiant and persistent sin hurts not only the one who insists on it, but many others. By no means will God's love and patience negate His holiness. By no means will He eternally tolerate continued opposition.⁴ He will bring persistent rebellion to an end. He will see to it that "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea" (Is. 11:9). Consider some indications of His holiness and determination to judge:

- In His covenant with mankind after the flood, He insisted that "whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed" (Gen. 9:6).
- He expressed hatred for those opposed to His holy (set-apart) nation Israel. He loved Israel (Amos 3:2) but hated Edom, the nation descended from Esau. "'I have loved you,' says the LORD...I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland..." (Mal. 1:2-3).
- He commanded Israel to exterminate the Canaanites, who would have contaminated the entire earth (Deut. 7:1-6). "When the LORD your God has delivered them over to you," He said, "then you must destroy them totally" (7:2).
- He required Israel to "take vengeance on" the Midianites when they tried to corrupt Israel (Num. 31:2). This included killing all the men, also the boys and "every woman who [had] slept with a man" (31:17).
- He decreed the death penalty for various infractions of His law.⁵ A well-known case is when the man defiantly gathered wood on the Sabbath day (Num. 15:30-36).

⁴ "Your eyes are too pure to look upon evil; You cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?" (Hab. 1:13)

⁵ With modern morals declining, we sometimes fail to appreciate the gravity of some sins. God's evaluation is far more appropriate than public opinion.

God is continually angry with wickedness. “God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day” (Ps. 7:11). Consider His holiness and love in respect to Nineveh, capital of Assyria. For centuries Assyria was well-known for “endless cruelty” (Nahum 3:19). The Book of Nahum expresses God’s anger and determination to punish it (Nahum 1:2–3), which He eventually did. But the Book of Jonah dramatizes His patient love and patience for the same people (Jonah 4:1–2).

In other words, God is angry with sinners at the same time He loves them. He must judge their sin even though now He patiently offers them pardon. His holy nature will not let sin continue until it pollutes His coming eternal kingdom. When we pray, “Thy kingdom come,” in effect we ask Him to judge and abolish sin. If evildoers “deliberately keep on sinning after [receiving] the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (Heb. 10:26–27).⁶

Can we improve on God’s attitude?!!⁷ Of course not. Thus, even as we preach the good news, His offer of pardon and life, we should want Him to judge and bring His kingdom. We will rejoice when He finally fills the world with righteousness ((Rev. 19:1–5). Even now we should rejoice in that prospect.

We would understand neither God’s love nor His holiness apart from His revelation. By nature we are too sinful, selfish, shortsighted, and stupid. But by listening to His Word and being taught by His Spirit we learn such things—and develop the same attitudes as God. We learn to “make a right judgment” (John 7:24), to “contend for the faith” (Jude 3), to hate “even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh” (Jude 23). Transformed into His image (2 Cor. 3:18), we come to share not only His love but His determination to judge. The latter is the spirit of imprecations.

⁶ “Since God’s first concern for His universe is its moral health, that is, its holiness, whatever is contrary to this is necessarily under His eternal displeasure. To preserve His creation God must destroy whatever would destroy it. When He arises to put down iniquity and save the world from irreparable moral collapse, He is said to be angry. Every wrathful judgment in the history of the world has been a holy act of preservation. The holiness of God, the wrath of God, and the health of the creation are inseparably united. God’s wrath is His utter intolerance of whatever degrades and destroys. He hates iniquity as a mother hates the polio that takes the life of her child.

“God is holy with an absolute holiness that knows no degrees, and this He cannot impart to His creatures. But there is a relative and contingent holiness which He shares with angels and seraphim in heaven and with redeemed men on earth as their preparation for heaven. This holiness God can and does impart to His children....He requires it of them. To Israel first and later to His Church God spoke, saying, ‘Be ye holy, for I am holy.’...No honest man can say ‘I am holy,’ but neither is any honest man willing to ignore the solemn words of the inspired writer, ‘Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.’

“Caught in this dilemma, what are we Christians to do? We must like Moses cover ourselves with faith and humility while we steal a quick look at the God whom no man can see and live....We must hide our unholiness in the wounds of Christ....We must take refuge from God in God. Above all we must believe that God sees us perfect in His Son while He disciplines and chastens and purges us that we may be partakers of His holiness.

“By faith and obedience, by constant meditation on the holiness of God, by loving righteousness and hating iniquity, by a growing acquaintance with the Spirit of holiness, we can...prepare ourselves for the eternal companionship of God and the saints above.” (A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, [San Francisco: Harper, 1961], p. 106).

⁷ If we do not want Him to judge, is it because we love sinners better than He does?!!