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Here is the extent of provision made. On the other, He died as 'a ransom for many'. Here is provision availed of in faith. The language of substitution, such as 'He bore our sins', applies only to those who have placed their trust in the atoning Sufferer. For all such it is true (but for none else) that—

'God will not payment twice demand,
First at my bleeding Surety's hand,
And then again at mine'.

Let us notice, also, that Scripture treats of the atoning sufferings of Christ qualitatively rather than quantitatively. To save one sinner from one sin took not less than the infinite anguish of Christ, not less than the dread forsakenness of the hours of Calvary's darkness, but this has value to save every sinner from every sin. Dr H. P. Liddon put it: 'Christ was as infinite in His condescensions as in His majesty'. The infinite saviour provided a sacrifice of infinite worth.

As we ponder these solemn themes, may there be given to us a sense of the immensity of the love of Christ, and also of the horror of sin, that will stir us to holiness of life and service, and an intense devotedness of all we are and all we have to Him who 'bore our sins in His own body on the tree'.

(To be continued)

THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

A. NAISMITH, M.A.

The dictionary gives the meaning of 'Imprecation' as 'a curse', 'a prayer for good or evil upon others'. Its etymology is found in the Latin word *impreco*, 'to pray upon'. It cannot be denied that many imprecations occur in the Hymnal of the Hebrews, the Psalms. The problem arising from such occurrences in that portion of the Scriptures is one of inspiration, and has been stated by Dr Perowne in the following sentences:

'Imprecations in the Psalms have occasioned more real perplexity than any other thing. The terrible denunciations of the writer's enemies, withering anathemas, imprecations so awful that

we almost tremble to read them—are they Jewish only, and not Christian? If so, how are we to reconcile this with a belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures? If we may use such language now, why do we have the exhortations directly opposed to this in the New Testament? If we may not use it ourselves now, how can it be said to be divinely inspired?

The recognition of the serious and solemn implicates of this statement of the problem leads the Bible student to examine the frequency or infrequency of such denunciations and the causes prompting them. A study of the Psalms as a whole leads to the following observations:

- (i) Not one psalm is completely imprecatory.
- (ii) Only one psalm is half, or more than half, imprecatory.
- (iii) Only fifteen psalms out of one hundred and fifty contain imprecations, i.e., *ten per cent.*
- (iv) Out of 2,350 or more verses in the Psalms about 65 only contain imprecations—or one in 36 verses.
- (v) Some of the imprecations are actually predictions and not prayers, and have the verb in the future indicative tense.
- (vi) The authorship of eleven of the fifteen psalms containing imprecations is definitely ascribed to David and, since Ps. 71 is clearly a continuation of Ps. 70, twelve are thus Davidic psalms. The remaining three are anonymous and may also have been written by David.
- (vii) Imprecations are fewest in Books III and IV, i.e., in those books corresponding to Leviticus and Numbers, the psalms of priesthood and pilgrimage, of the sanctuary and the wilderness, for prayers for vengeance on enemies is not the normal language of God's priests or God's pilgrims. Most of the imprecatory psalms are found in the second and fifth books.

The existence of imprecations in the inspired Word of God which enjoins love to our enemies, blessing in return for cursing, and prayer for our persecutors, presents not only a theological

problem but also a moral difficulty. Recognizing how great this problem is, several expositors of the Scriptures have attempted to explain it, or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say, to explain it away. Three lines of explanation have been followed in attempts to find a solution.

Bishop Horne refers all imprecations to the future when just retribution will overtake all the wicked who have died impenitent. In this view the imprecations are not to be considered as prayers but merely as predictions, the principle underlying them being retribution, not retaliation. The objection to this is that it violates the accepted laws of language and grammar, since in the Hebrew of the Psalms, the Optative Mood is used, and this is an abbreviated form of the Future Indicative tense, but distinct from it. We are therefore forced to admit that those imprecatory passages are not predictions but direct petitions for Divine vengeance on enemies.

Another school of interpretation, represented by Arnold, maintains that the reference is not to individuals, not to foes of flesh and blood, but to the moral enemies of the soul, thus spiritualizing each and every prayer for the overthrow of the persecutors of God's servant or His people. While a very few imprecatory prayers may possibly fit into this exegesis, the context in most of the passages clearly shows that those prayed against were personal enemies and human transgressors.

A third suggestion propounded by Dr Taylor and others is that the imprecations are not those of the Psalmist but of his enemies, and that a word such as 'saying', omitted in the original, should be supplied before each utterance. This, like the other attempted solutions, must be rejected as 'a strained and artificial interpretation'.

The moral difficulty therefore remains and resolves itself into the question, How are we to reconcile the prayers of the Psalmist that call for, or wish for, evil to come upon his enemies with the teaching of the New Testament, with our Lord's intercession on the Cross for forgiveness for His enemies, and with Stephen's prayer at his martyrdom for pardon for his persecutors? Taking the New Testament as a whole, we do not consider certain isolated

passages which might seem imprecatory to be incompatible with the general tenor of the teaching of our Lord and His apostles or their prayers for the blessing of their enemies. Examples of those are found in 1 Cor. 16:22, where Paul writes, 'If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema Maranatha' ('accursed at His Coming'), and the prayer of the martyrs under the altar in Rev. 6:9-11, 'How long, O Lord, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?' Righteous indignation, zeal for the honour of the Lord, or a yearning for the fulfilment of His eternal purposes in every detail doubtless account for such.

But what can be said of the imprecations found in the Psalter? Remembering that David was the author of most of the imprecatory psalms, possibly of them all, we conclude that the true explanation may be found by taking account of the writer and his times. Let us, therefore, consider those prayers for vengeance with reference to David's character, circumstances, convictions and creed.

Right away we affirm our unshaken belief in the Divine inspiration of all the Psalms and of all the Old Testament Scriptures as well as the New Testament. They are all 'God-breathed', so we may confidently say,

'David's Psalms had ne'er been sung
Had David's God ne'er touched his tongue.'

Some of the Psalms, sown in tribulation, grew in the soil of sorrow, in the midst of thorns and troubles, and were watered by the Psalmist's tears, for—

'David's Psalms had ne'er been sung
If David's heart had ne'er been wrung.'

Others again were born in jubilation and matured in the sunshine of heavenly ecstasy, for

'David's Psalms had ne'er been sung
If David's harp had ne'er been strung.'

Despite the many vicissitudes of David's career, he was 'a man after God's own heart'. God Himself, speaking to Samuel the prophet and through Stephen the martyr, summed up in these words DAVID'S CHARACTER. Was he vindictive, bloodthirsty,

revengeful? On the contrary, he was kind, gracious, compassionate, forgiving, and in these respects reflected the attributes of God. This spirit of non-retaliation is exemplified in David's treatment of those individuals by whom he was grievously wronged. King Saul was jealous of him, hated him, tried to kill him with a javelin, compelled him to become an exile, pursued him over mountains and plains, and forced him to hide in caves and dens of the earth. Yet, when on two different occasions, David might have taken Saul's life and ended his own days of banishment, he refrained and spared his enemy. In his treatment of the churlish Nabal, too, David displayed a spirit of magnanimity and restraint. Shimei, who heaped curses on David's head in the critical days of Absalom's revolt, received the King's personal forgiveness and, apart from his dying charge to his son and successor, Solomon, to whom he handed over his official duties as ruler of God's people and representative of Divine justice, there is no evidence that David personally desired to see revenge taken on the man who had been a traitor to Jehovah and to His anointed. The desire for retaliation is wrong, because it is actuated by personal motives. The desire for retribution may be right when the justice and honour of God are to be vindicated. Our Lord Himself Who has 'left us an example that we should follow His steps', 'when He was reviled, reviled not again', but 'committed His cause to Him that judgeth righteously' (1 Peter 2:21-23). The only conclusion to be drawn from a consideration of David's character is that the spirit that formulated the prayers expressed in the imprecatory psalms was not one of revenge or vindictiveness.

DAVID'S CIRCUMSTANCES must also be taken into account. The titles of such psalms as Ps. 7: 59 are proof of the persecutions and afflictions that he endured. It is clear from Ps. 109 that his foes had requited his love with hatred and his kindness with evil. In the psalms in which David invokes the retribution of a righteous God on his tormentors and their families, he invariably casts himself upon Jehovah, pleads his own weakness and helplessness and prays for Divine strength and succour. The inclusion of the families of his foes in his imprecations seems to weaken the argument that it was only out of severe tribulation and under intense

provocation that the psalmist cried to God for personal help and righteous retribution on his enemies, until we remember that the family was an important unit among the Hebrews and a man's fate decided his family's fate also. Examples of this are found in the observance of the Passover and in Achan's trespass and punishment.

Closely allied with David's attitude to his personal circumstances are DAVID'S CONVICTIONS. He refused to take vengeance personally on King Saul because Saul was the Lord's anointed King, yet could commit Saul's punishment to the God who had bestowed on him the Kingdom. David, appointed by God as Shepherd and Ruler of God's chosen race, looked upon his enemies as the foes of Jehovah's people and therefore of Jehovah his God, and in his psalms prayed to God to deal with them. Their offences were committed against God and David's first concern was that righteous retribution might be done. The imprecatory prayers are therefore the expression both of David's convictions and of his conception of Divine justice. See Ps. 139: 19-24. The desire of his heart was 'that they (his enemies) may seek Thy name, O Lord' (Ps. 83:15-16). The temporal punishment he invoked upon them was in order that, as 'the chastisement of the Lord', it might produce in them 'the peaceable fruit of righteousness', and result in spiritual and eternal blessing. There is thus no personal motive in the imprecations contained in the Psalms. For the sake of God's Kingdom, His people and His glory the punishment of wrong-doers is often necessary. After the war of 1939 to 1946, the Second World War, those who had occasioned the death of millions of innocent people in war and in cruel concentration camps were deservedly punished, and society experienced satisfaction at the execution of justice and reaped the benefits accruing from it. David's zeal for God's honour, his love of righteousness and his sense of responsibility as 'the minister of God' and His revenger to execute wrath upon the evil-doer were, therefore, the cause of the imprecations that he voiced in his psalms.

The Psalms were all written in the age of Law, under the old Covenant that exacted 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'.

DAVID'S CREED was different from ours. The imprecatory psalms show the spirit of an age in which retribution was a fundamental principle (Lev. 24:19; Jer. 11:20). When the Lord Jesus came, He did not abrogate the Law, for He said, 'I am not come to destroy but to fulfil' the law (Matt. 5:17). He also asserted with authority, 'But I say unto you that ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also' (Matt. 5:39). He gave us a new and better Covenant and a new Creed, for in Him grace and truth were perfectly balanced. We may be certain that Divine retribution will overtake the impenitent evil-doer, but we cannot pray now that it may. We have the Gospel of the grace of God as our creed, for in it is revealed both Divine righteousness and Divine grace. So, in harmony with the compassionate yearning of the 'God of matchless grace', we pray for all men and desire 'that all men may be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth'. David's creed was different: he knew only the law of retribution, and therefore could not apply in a dispensation of law the terms of a covenant of grace not yet revealed. Hence the imprecatory psalms have their place in God's progressive revelation to mankind and did not conflict with God's moral law in the age when they were uttered.

THE PROPHECY OF EZEKIEL

H. L. ELLISON, B.A., B.D.

The National Resurrection of Israel (37:1-14)

The long sweep of Israel's history from Sinai to the Babylonian exile is the process by which God taught men in general and Israel in particular that national election and blood descent were inadequate for the creation of a people for God's own possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. This goal could only become a fulfilled reality, when all its members had passed through the transforming experience that made of Jacob an Israel. Until then 'they are not all Israel that are of Israel'.

Ezekiel has already given us the picture of God's king, of the transformed land and people. He now turns and examines the