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The Imprecatory Psalms

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For centuries, believers have received great comfort and consolation from the book of Psalms. It may be so loved because it has encouraged Christians in times of sorrow and, at the same time, invited them to cultivate a deeper intimacy with the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a book which encompasses the broad spectrum of human emotion. At one time, it lifts the reader to the heights of glorious praise at the contemplation of God's greatness, and at another time, it escorts him through the throes of despair and discouragement. It is so adored because it relates, in principle, to so many human experiences.

However, there are parts of this cherished book which raise questions and pose difficulties to its readers. Of such, are various psalms containing "appeals for God to pour out His wrath on the psalmist's enemies. These psalms are commonly classified 'imprecatory psalms.' These psalms have been problematic for Bible students because of the difficulty in reconciling them with Christian thought."¹ Longman adds that the imprecatory psalms represent perhaps the most difficult portion of the Psalms to reconcile with our feelings about God.² Barnes is even more stern in commenting that

perhaps there is no part of the Bible that gives more perplexity and pain to its readers than this; perhaps nothing that constitutes a more plausible objection to the belief that the psalms are productions of inspired men than the spirit of revenge which they sometimes seem

¹ J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms" *BibSac* (1981) 35.

² Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1988) 28.

to breathe and the spirit of cherished malice and implacableness which the writers seem to manifest.³

There is no doubt that a mere casual reading of these imprecatory psalms has proven to be troublesome for many sincere Christians. However, if they are truly portions of the inspired text, they must not be ignored or overlooked. Since *all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable* (2 Tim. 3:16), it is important that these imprecatory psalms be clearly understood in order to discover their profitability. What purpose do these psalms serve? What is their value for today? The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the imprecatory Psalms, particularly by dealing with proposed solutions and by presenting practical considerations for their interpretation.

Pertinent Questions Concerning the Imprecatory Psalms

What is an Imprecation?

"An imprecation is an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or the enemies of God."⁴ Such imprecations were employed by Moses against his enemies (Num. 10:35), by Deborah and Barak in their triumph over their enemies (Jud. 5:31), and by Nehemiah centuries later during his encounter with his antagonists, Sanballat and Tobiah (Neh. 4:4). Jeremiah, the prophet, also made frequent use of imprecations during his ministry to apostate Judah (Jer. 11:20; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21-23; 20:12).

Imprecations are not limited to the Old Testament. The Apostle Paul used them on several occasions. He closed his first letter to the Corinthian believers by warning, *If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema Maranatha* (I Cor. 16:22). Literally, the word *anathema* means a thing devoted to destruction. He placed the same curse upon those who preached *another gospel* (Gal. 1:8-9). He also expressed a sincere desire to see the Judaizers, opponents of the Galatian believers, *cut off* (Gal. 5:12). Finally, in his closing remarks

³ Albert Barnes, *Notes, Critical, Explanatory and Practical on the Book of Psalms* (London: Blackie & Son, 1968) 6.

⁴ Laney, 35.

to Timothy, Paul did not fail to recall the evil which Alexander the coppersmith had done to him. Consequently, Paul acknowledged that the Lord would *reward him according to his works* (2 Tim. 4:14). In addition to these, the Tribulation saints martyred for their faith will cry out imploring, *How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth* (Rev. 6:10)?

The preceding citations are characteristically imprecations because they are invocations — a prayer or request to God, containing a request that one's enemies or the enemies of God be judged and justly punished.⁵ However, "the label *imprecatory* may be misleading if it is not used to denote its more proper sense of invoking judgment, calamity, or curse in an appeal to God who alone is the judge of all beings."⁶ Consequently, in the imprecatory psalms, "the imprecation, instead of being a minor element, is greatly multiplied until it becomes a major element or leading feature."⁷

Which Psalms may be Identified as Imprecatory?

Chalmers Martin insightfully remarks that

it is usual to speak of 'imprecatory psalms,' but it may well be questioned whether the phrase is not a misleading one, in so far, at least, as it seems to imply that there is a body of psalms in which imprecation forms a chief element. For this, of course, is far from being the case. There are in the whole Psalter not more than eighteen psalms that contain any element of imprecation, and, in most of these this element is a very minor one, embodied in a single line, it may be, or in a single verse. These eighteen psalms contain three hundred and sixty-eight verses, of which only sixty-five include anything that can be called an imprecation. Even in the case of the three psalms which show the largest measure of the imprecatory spirit, only twenty-three verses out of a total of ninety-five can be properly said to be imprecations. It is, therefore, more true to the facts of the case to speak of 'imprecations in the psalms' than of 'imprecatory psalms.'⁸

⁵ Ibid, 36.

⁶ Walter C. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: Inter Varsity Press, 1988) 172.

⁷ Laney, 36.

⁸ Chalmers Martin, "The Imprecations in the Psalms" *PTR* (1903) 537.

One may search in vain to find a single psalm which may be entirely imprecatory. However, there are psalms which contain definite evidences of imprecations. The following table reflects the opinions of the various authors concerning the identity of the imprecatory psalms.

Psalm	7	35	55	58	59	69	79	83	109	137	139
Walton ⁹		*		*		*		*	*	*	
Laney ¹⁰	*	*		*	*	*		*	*	*	*
Kaiser ¹¹		*	*		*	*	*		*	*	
Vos ¹²			*		*	*	*		*	*	
Bullock ¹³		*			*				*		
Geisler ¹⁴		*				*			*	*	
Beardslee ¹⁵	*	*				*			*		

It is obvious from this chart that opinions vary as to the number and identity of the imprecatory psalms. However, one thing is certain, of the eleven psalms listed above, David is the author of eight of them (7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 109, 139). Asaph has been credited with two (79 and 83), and the remaining one (137) is anonymous.

Although the imprecatory psalms may be dealt with as an individual classification, it may be helpful to understand that they are associated with the lament psalms. In fact, Longman mentions that seven elements are associated with a lament; imprecation is only one

⁹ John H. Walton, *Chronological Charts of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1978) 73.

¹⁰ Laney, 117.

¹¹ Kaiser, 171

¹² Johannes G. Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms" *WTJ* (1942) 123.

¹³ C. Hassell Bullock, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979) 144.

¹⁴ Norman L. Geisler, *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977) 202.

¹⁵ J. W. Beardslee, "The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms" *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* (1897) 490.

of them.¹⁶ Though the imprecatory psalms, when narrowly defined comprise a tiny portion of the book of Psalms, when classified within the genre of lament psalms, they constitute about one-third of the Psalter.¹⁷ "The lament in the psalms is threefold. It is divisible according to its three subjects: God, the one who laments, and the enemy."¹⁸ This is consistent with the characteristics of imprecatory psalms in that there is always present an imprecator (David, et al.), ones who occasion the imprecation (his enemies), and One to whom the imprecation is directed (God Himself).

Why are these Psalms so Difficult to Understand?

The imprecatory psalms have bewildered multitudes who have read them. Many view them with contempt and go so far as to think that they must make apologies for them. "The objection is not to the term itself so much as to the manner of its use by many persons, as if to designate a psalm as 'imprecatory' were almost the same as calling it wicked or immoral."¹⁹ C. S. Lewis seems to go to the extent of calling them 'devilish.'²⁰ Are these the product of some madman who has lost control of his emotions and is incorrigibly infuriated? Or are these the words of the trusted Psalmist himself speaking through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? How are these curses to be understood? They seem to be contradictory to the Lord's teaching to love one's enemies (Matt. 5:43-48) and to put away the sword and share the gospel in love with those who persecute the believer (Matt. 26:52).²¹ This apparent conflict is the issue which is at the heart of the problem. As the New Testament believer comes to these psalms in his reading of the Bible, he must pause and consider: 1) if these psalms are relevant for him today, and 2) if so,

¹⁶ Longman, 27.

¹⁷ Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987) 240.

¹⁸ Claus Westerman, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981) 169.

¹⁹ Vos, 123.

²⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1958) 25.

²¹ Longman, 138.

how will he apply the principles of these psalms. The believer soon asks himself how it can be right to wish or pray for the destruction or doom of others as is done in the imprecatory psalms?²² Laney concisely states that "the basic problem with the imprecatory psalms is an ethical one."²³ These are legitimate questions for every believer to ask and for which he must find answers.

Proposed Solutions in Dealing with the Imprecatory Psalms

Many Bible scholars have sought to offer possible solutions to the problem of the imprecatory psalms. It is important to examine and evaluate these possible solutions before considering practical guidelines in furthering the believer's understanding of these psalms.

The Imprecations are Those of David's Enemies

Some interpreters attribute the imprecatory psalms to the enemies of David rather than to David himself. It is suggested that Psalm 109:6-20 was uttered by David's enemies against him. In order to arrive at such an opinion, one must insert the participial form of *'amar* ("saying") at the end of verse 5 so that it would read:

"And they have rewarded me evil for good,
And hatred for my love, *saying*,
Set thou a wicked man over him:
And let Satan stand at his right hand."

Proponents of this view use Psalm 2:2 to substantiate their rationale of supplying Psalm 109:5,6 with the word "*saying*".²⁴

However, while an insertion of a word may be justified on occasion, especially in Hebrew poetry, there are certain limits to which one can go.

In Psalm 2:2, the addition of the word "*saying*" is suggested upon the very face of the passage. When the arch-conspirators assemble

²² Vos, 124.

²³ Laney, 37.

²⁴ Beardslee, 491.

and begin to plot among themselves how they may throw off the yoke of the Almighty, it is very natural for the poet to introduce the very words they utter, as the most convincing proof of their malignant and treasonable purpose. But in Psalm 109 the transition from verse 5 and 6 is not such as to give any intimation that we are about to pass from the words of David's humble prayer to the maledictions of his relentless enemy. Nor are we prepared for any such sudden change from the language of the enemy to the prayer of David, when at the end of verse 20, where the maledictions end, we find David's prayer again resumed. Such is the connection of these verses, 6-20, to the context before and after them, that we can have no reason to say it is a foreign element introduced into the prayer.²⁵

Therefore, it is sufficient to say that, based on this reasoning, it is inconsistent to believe that this imprecatory psalm (109) was spoken by David's enemies.

They Merely Represent David's own Sentiments

Another solution that has been purported is that the imprecatory psalms are an expression of David's own sentiments. They are merely an exhibition of the Psalmist's emotions out of control with bitterness and vengeance. Such is the position of C. S. Lewis who viewed these psalms as expressions of personal hatred and moral shortcomings. He asserts, "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."²⁶ Lewis apparently concludes that David was speaking out of personal vindictiveness and that he was clearly in the wrong for doing so. The implication is made that if David had been a better man, he would not have had such perverse thoughts.²⁷ After all, David was a man of similar passions.

If ever a man had provocation to speak unadvisedly with his lips it was he. Innocent of any crime, deserving on account of his talents and character, as well as of his splendid services both to Saul and to

²⁵ *Ibid*, 492.

²⁶ Lewis, 22.

²⁷ Beardslee, 492.

the nation, of the highest honors that the king could bestow, he found himself an outlaw upon whose head a price had been set."²⁸

Time and again, David claimed his innocence. He was the unfortunate recipient of undeserved malignity from his foes. Surely, if ever there was a man who would be justified in unleashing such imprecations, it was he. "What wonder, it is asked, if even a good man should, under such circumstances, be betrayed into occasional outbursts of fierce desire for vengeance upon enemies so mean, so false, so cruel!"²⁹

Was David expressing personal vindictiveness? Were his words veiled by a spirit of personal vengeance? Are the imprecatory psalms demonstrations of mere outbursts of uncontrolled emotion?

David exhibited just the opposite of a vindictive or revengeful spirit in his own life. He was personally assaulted time and time again by the likes of a Shimei, a Doeg, a cunning Saul, and his own son Absalom (1 Sam. 24:1-7; 26:5). Never once did he attempt to effect his own vindication or lift his hand to exercise what many may have regarded as his prerogative as royalty.³⁰

In fact, "when Saul died, David wrote the touching 'Song of the Bow' in 2 Samuel 1 mourning Saul and Jonathan's death. David even executed the Amalekite for rejoicing over Saul's death and for claiming to have killed him."³¹ David's character was one of purity and selflessness. This is manifested in the way he responded toward those who sought to do him evil. In the midst of one of his imprecatory psalms, David says:

They rewarded me evil for good to the spoiling of my soul. But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting; and my prayer returned into mine own bosom. I behaved myself as though he had been my friend or brother: I

²⁸ Martin, 540.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kaiser, 173.

³¹ Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1983) 294.

bowed down heavily, as one that mourneth for his mother (Ps. 35:12-14).

Was David characterized by personal vindictiveness? Not at all, rather, he was characterized by just the opposite, as this personal testimony proves. In fact, he exhibited the qualities of being a man of rarely found integrity. "The actions of David in relation to Saul are vivid proof that revenge was not a motivation behind his imprecatory prayers."³²

However, something far more serious is tied to the accusation that David was merely expressing his own sentiments. At the very heart of this allegation is the fundamental issue of inspiration, for if one alleges that David wrote these psalms with any other but an upright spirit, they cast great uncertainty upon the very nature and credibility of inspiration. The issue may be simplified by asking: Are the imprecatory psalms the product of the Holy Spirit or are they merely the work of an embittered human being? The interpreter who seeks to dissect the Scriptures into inspired and uninspired sections stands on unsure ground. Nevertheless, it is absolutely necessary to understand that, in addition to the New Testament attestation to the inspiration of Scripture (Acts 4:25; 2 Tim. 3:16), the Old Testament refers specifically to the inspiration of the Psalter:

Now these are the last words of David. David the son of Jesse saith, and the man who was raised on high saith, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet Psalmist of Israel: the Spirit of Jehovah spake by me, and his word was upon my tongue (2 Sam. 23:1, 2).

Therefore, "any attempted solution of the ethical problem of the imprecatory psalms which regards these psalms as merely human compositions must be rejected as contrary to a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, as well as to the claim made by the Scripture itself for the inspiration of the Psalter."³³

³² Geisler, 203.

³³ Vos, 128.

The Old Testament Maintained an Inferior Principle of Spiritual Life

Unlike the previous view, this one seems to carry a bit more legitimacy. It asserts that believers in the Old Testament were somehow less adequately informed in matters of ethics and conduct. The spiritual standard, it is maintained, was inferior to the fuller revelation which the New Testament believers enjoyed. Thus, it is unfair to assume that David would have been adequately equipped to distinguish between the person of the evildoer and his evil actions.

Not having a very clear understanding of the broadness of the divine administration of this world, he could not see how sin could be checked unless the sinner himself was destroyed; and hence he prays that the sinner may fall, that he may perish amid the plots he has sprung for the destruction of the innocent. The sinner himself must become an object-lesson commentary on the destructive character of his own sin.³⁴

If the Old Testament principle of spiritual life was, in some way, inferior to the principle of spiritual life taught in the New Testament, to what degree was it inferior? Scroggie answers this question by calling attention to the distinction between the old dispensation and the new. In fact, he goes so far as to assert that "Christ plainly taught that the Old was inferior to the New, and that things were overlooked in the one that are inexcusable in the other (cf. Matt. 5:43-48; 19:8, 9; Luke 9:51-56)."³⁵ Scroggie further affirms that "because the thinking of the Hebrews was concrete and not abstract they did not distinguish, as the New Testament does, between the sinner and his sin."³⁶ It is apparent that those who hold this view see a very minimal relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

This position seems to be a bit more believable on the basis that it does not question the inspiration of the text. On the other hand, the minor subtleties which are associated with this view may be enough to lead into error. For example, to take the position that the Old Testament believer was in some sort of haze concerning clear

³⁴ Beardslee, 495.

³⁵ W. Graham Scroggie, *Psalms* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1965) 77.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 78.

directions for spiritual living is to be shortsighted to clear passages of Old Testament Scripture such as:

Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him. Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself: I am the Lord (Lev. 19:17-18).

To me [Yahweh] belongeth vengeance, and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste (Deut. 32:35).

Rejoice not when thine enemy falleth, and let not thine heart be glad when he stumbleth: Lest the Lord see it, and it displease him, and he turn away his wrath from him (Prov. 24:17-18).

If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: For thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee (Prov. 25:21-22).

There is overwhelming evidence that the Old Testament believer had full access to the plain teaching of Scripture and that there is no lack for spiritual guidance in matters of ethics and behavior. From the above citations, the Old Testament believer would be able to understand: 1) that he is not to pursue personal vengeance; 2) that he is responsible to love his enemy—this was not optional, but obligatory; 3) that to the Lord belongs vengeance; and 4) that he is to act charitably toward his enemy. Therefore, to argue that the Old Testament believers—specifically, David—did not have the revelation needed in order to know how to respond correctly to his enemies is far from accurate. Adequate revelation was given. God did not leave His people in the dark concerning ethical and moral guidelines. Beardslee appropriately comments:

That David had the moral light enjoyed by those who have the Gospel, no one will affirm. But that David's moral eyesight was so defective and the work of God's Spirit in his heart so incomplete that he did not know the difference between blessing and cursing; that he could in one sentence revel in the thought of the divine compassion and in the next utter imprecations so full of bitterness

that our tongue almost fears to repeat them, is utterly to confuse and pervert the truth.³⁷

Progressive revelation plays a large part in understanding this problem more clearly. "Progressive revelation is not to be thought of as a progress from error to truth, but rather as a progress from the partial and obscure to the complete and clear."³⁸ Although David, by no means, had access to the amount of revelation which New Testament believers have, he still had sufficient amount to know how to relate to his enemies. To dismiss these imprecatory psalms as mere products of some Davidic 'dark ages' is an inadequate means of dealing with the problem.

In addition, before passing judgment on the seeming distastefulness of the imprecatory psalms, it may be valuable to refer to their use in the New Testament. The following table identifies the Old Testament verse and where it was quoted in the New Testament.

OT IMPRECATORY PSALMS QUOTED IN THE NT		
Speaker	NT Reference	Psalm Quoted
John	John 2:17	69:9
Jesus	John 15:25	35:19; 69:4
Peter	Acts 1:20	69:25; 109:8
Paul	Romans 11:9-10	69:22-23
Paul	Romans 15:3	69:9

The fact that the very same psalms, which have been discredited by some, are used in the New Testament, lends great credibility to their validity. Of the vast store of the Old Testament, Jesus, Paul, and Peter chose to use verses which were contained in imprecatory psalms. Thus, they recognized their significance. In fact, except for the more frequently quoted Messianic psalms (1, 22, 110, 118), three major imprecatory psalms (35, 69, 109) are the next most frequently quoted psalms in the New Testament.³⁹ "In the final analysis, the

³⁷ Beardslee, 495.

³⁸ Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964) 437.

³⁹ Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, 293.

Old and New Testaments stand or fall together. Therefore, the old-and-new-dispensation explanation is not satisfactory by itself."⁴⁰

The Imprecations are Speaking of David's Spiritual Enemies

It has been suggested that the *enemies* in the imprecatory psalms are the psalmist's spiritual antagonists rather than human personages. This view asserts that evil spiritual influences are personified as evil men.⁴¹ Beardslee comments:

That he should represent evil principles as evil men, and speak as if they actually stood before him, is a figure of speech so common in poetry that it need excite no comment. If David speaks of spiritual matters in language which primarily applies only to physical things, he simply shows that he is true to his surroundings and speaks after the manner of the time in which he lives. For in those early ages the spiritual was almost always set forth under physical forms, and that physical form did not in the least hinder men from grasping its spiritual significance. . . . So, according to this theory, we are not to suppose that David is thinking of any real person against whom he invokes these severe judgments, but rather of those spiritual influences which he recognizes as his real and most dangerous enemies.⁴²

This seems to be a convenient way of excusing oneself from dealing with the difficult area of interpreting the imprecation in relation to human beings. Instead of admitting that David was using imprecations against his human enemies, some interpreters attempt to read into the passage something that is not there. There are no indicators suggesting that David has switched from talking about his human enemies to talking about his spiritual ones. It is clearly obvious that evil persons whose destruction is prayed for are not temptations, sinful tendencies in human nature, nor even demonic powers. They were human beings, who may, indeed, have been under

⁴⁰ Bullock, 145.

⁴¹ Laney, 39.

⁴² Beardslee, 497.

the influence of demonic powers, but who were nonetheless human.⁴³

The interpretive method represented by this view is inaccurately capricious because it makes the interpreter determine the meaning and not the text itself. The interpreter is left to his own whim in deciding when David is speaking about his spiritual enemies or about his human ones. This is a very hazardous hermeneutic because it leaves the interpretive door wide open to all kinds of fanciful interpretations. If the text refers to some human enemy, it is not within the rights of the interpreter to make it say something other. The ramifications reach far outside the Psalter to the entire Bible. If spiritualizing may be permitted to take place in the imprecatory psalms, then it may logically be permitted in other places of the Bible as well.

In addition, the person whose doom is sought in Psalm 109:6 is clearly distinguished from demonic powers: "*Set thou a wicked man over him: and let Satan stand at his right hand.*" The same psalm continues: "*Let his days be few; and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow*" (verses 8, 9). The New Testament later indicates that this psalm was prophetic of, and fulfilled in, Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:20). This imprecatory psalm refers to an actual person. However, whether the reference is known or not, there is no appropriate basis for spiritualizing so as to refer to purely spiritual or non-human powers or persons.⁴⁴

The Imprecations are Prophetic

Another way of interpreting the imprecatory psalms so that the psalmist is relieved from the charge of speaking out of a spirit of bitterness or revenge is to construe them as being prophetic. In this way, the psalmist is not expressing a desire for the destruction of the wicked, but rather is merely predicting it. "They are predicting in graphic terms, the ruin which is sure to overtake the impenitent sinner, according to the principle that 'whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap'."⁴⁵ The psalmist enjoys, according to this view, the dual office of poet and prophet. Although this may be the most

⁴³ Vos, 127.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 125.

fitting view considered to this point, it still must be rejected for a number of reasons.

The first reason why this view must be rejected is because of the language used in the psalm.

While it is possible that some expressions in these imprecatory psalms are to be understood as predictions of fact rather than as prayers, it is nevertheless certain that most of the expressions must be regarded as prayers and that many of them are prayers in form and definitely addressed to God.⁴⁶

For example, Psalm 55 opens with a prayer to God: "*Give ear to my prayer, O God*" and closes with a prayer. Nestled in the midst of this prayer is a request that God would destroy his enemies (verse 9). There is no reason to believe that David made a transition to a prophecy in the middle of his prayer. He is clearly addressing God. Therefore, he is not merely predicting the doom of his enemies, but actually praying for their doom.

A second reason why this view must be rejected is because of the confusion it causes between trying to decide whether the psalmist is in the praying mode or in the prophetic mode. This view is accompanied by shades of subjectivity because one is never quite certain whether to translate the psalm as a prayer to God or as a prophecy. This too, may leave the door open to all kinds of capricious interpretations.

They are Reflections of the Humanity of the Psalmist

Related somewhat to the first view, this position holds that the imprecatory psalms simply manifest the humanness of the psalmist. They are included in the Psalter for the purpose of allowing the reader to see somewhat of himself in them.

In the psalmists' tendency to chew over and over the cud of some injury, to dwell in a kind of self-torture on every circumstance that aggravates it, most of us can recognize something we have met in ourselves. We are, after all, blood-brothers to these ferocious, self-pitying, barbaric men.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Ibid, 126.

⁴⁷ Lewis, 23-24.

The reason for the poets' use of such language is because of the world they lived in. It was a "world of savage punishments, of massacre and violence, of blood sacrifice in all countries and human sacrifice in many."⁴⁸ Lewis did not mince words when he detailed the reason for which the psalmist uttered such words. He views the imprecations as purely the work of a man with bottled-up hatred and malice. Consequently, how are these words to be understood? As not being God's Word but the psalmist's very human expression of hate? But if this is just a demonstration of the psalmist's very real expression of malignity, it reflects on the whole book of Psalms and raises the question of how any part of the Psalms may be treated as canonical.⁴⁹ Therefore, this view must be rejected as a solution for interpreting the imprecations.

Practical Considerations in Determining A Proper Solution

The Basis for the Imprecations

The Abrahamic covenant promised blessing on those who blessed Abraham and his progeny and cursing on those who cursed them (Gen. 12:1-3). The fundamental ground on which one may justify the imprecations in the Psalms is this covenantal basis for a curse on Israel's enemies.

On the basis of the unconditional Abrahamic covenant, David had a perfect right, as the representative of the nation, to pray that God would effect what He had promised — cursing on those who cursed or attacked Israel. David's enemies were a great threat to the well-being of Israel! The cries for judgment in the imprecatory psalms are appeals for Yahweh to carry out His judgment against those who would curse the nation — judgment in accordance with the provisions of the Abrahamic covenant.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid, 23.

⁴⁹ Longman, 139.

⁵⁰ Laney, 42.

The Attitude of the Imprecator

Although a basis for David's imprecations may be found in his covenant relationship to God, the believer will profit by considering several principles which may be drawn from his prayers.

He longed to see God's righteousness vindicated. Foremost in the heart and mind of the psalmist is his desire to see God's cause and kingdom vindicated. He was concerned that the wicked would know that God is sovereign and that He is interested in executing justice and judgment on the earth. David had such a deep heart for God that He viewed the enemies of God as his own enemies. Thus, he felt confident in praying that God would do to His enemies as He already purposed.

It may also be helpful to realize that the Old Testament believers, at least until David's time, possessed a very vague knowledge of existence beyond the grave. Unlike today, where the believer is aware that God may not right all wrongs in this life, but primarily reserves judgment until after the grave, the Old Testament saints could not comfort themselves with these thoughts. This may be another reason why they were so concerned with seeing God bring judgment upon His enemies on earth. Therefore, "these hard sayings are legitimate expressions of longings of Old Testament saints for the vindication that only God's righteousness can bring."⁵¹

He manifested a hatred for sin. David was such a man of holiness and integrity that he hated sin. He was sensitive to the sin in his own life (Ps. 139:23-24) and he was sensitive to sin and injustice as was indulged in by his enemies. He did not only see his enemies as opposers of God and His cause, but he also viewed them as the very embodiment of wickedness.⁵² David was repulsed at the act of sin as he saw it committed—without regulation—by God's enemies. If this posture seems, at first, to appear to be a bit over-zealous, all one needs to do is remember that on two occasions the Lord Jesus Christ demonstrated His righteous anger in casting out the money changers from the Temple. Such an attitude is proper for the child of God as he witnesses abuses and wickedness. In fact, if no righteous anger is

⁵¹ Kaiser, *Hard Sayings*, 172.

⁵² Martin, 547.

present in the heart of the believer, it is a good indication that his heart has grown cold to the concerns of God. "Modern society has such a weak view of God that they have left no room for His holy judgment against sin. Furthermore, too many Christians today have such a weak and inadequate view of sin that they have become so sentimental that they have ceased to be spiritual."⁵³

He remained free of personal vindictiveness. Throughout all the imprecations mentioned by David, it is important to notice that he remained free of having a heart full of a desire for personal revenge. In fact, what is sometimes identified as personal vindictiveness needs to be placed in a larger context. The psalmist consigned the matter to God. There was absolutely no effort on his part to take personal revenge.⁵⁴ He was not wishing that his enemies be destroyed for his own pleasure. "The judgment called for is based on divine justice and not on human grudges."⁵⁵ David was a man of integrity and uprightness of heart. Of all the allegations hurled at David's motives in the imprecatory psalms, the suggestion that he was speaking out of a heart of personal vengeance is far from the truth.

Conclusion

The imprecatory psalms have been a cause for confusion for many believers. This is not difficult to understand in light of the fact that many diverse and erroneous interpretations have been proposed endeavoring to explain their meaning.

Recognizing that the Abrahamic covenant played a prominent role in David's imprecations does not lessen their significance for the believer today. Actually, upon a close examination of these psalms, a Christian will be compelled to examine his own attitude by asking himself if he, as David, truly longs to see God's righteousness vindicated while remaining free from possessing an attitude of personal vengeance.

⁵³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Meet Yourself in the Psalms* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983) 138.

⁵⁴ Bullock, 145.

⁵⁵ Geisler, 203.