

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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What about the Imprecatory Psalms?

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The Book of *Psalms* has been aptly described by Garry Brantley as an infallible and inerrant “collection of songs and prayers covering a variety of themes.”¹ Some of the *Psalms* are *Psalms* of praise: individual (30, 34) and corporate (66, 75); some are *Psalms* of pilgrimage (120-134); some are Messianic *Psalms* (2, 45, 110); some are *Psalms* which celebrate the universal reign of God (47, 93-99); some are prayers: of individuals (3, 4, 38) and of the community (44, 79); some *Psalms* are penitential (32, 51); and some are *Psalms* of imprecation (69, 109). It is the imprecatory *Psalms* which are the subject of this study.

Imprecatory *Psalms*, to quote Gleason Archer, are those which “contain appeals to God to pour out His wrath upon the Psalmist’s enemies.”² Or in the words of J. A. Motyer, they are “*Psalms* containing passages seeking the hurt of someone else.”³ At first glance, such “prayers of destruction” may appear to be out of accord with the Christian’s responsibility to love his enemies (*Matthew* 5:44). Further reflection, however, will reveal that this is not the case.

As to the number of imprecatory *Psalms*, there are differing opinions. Some scholars see as few as three, others as many as twenty. The reason for this difference is that there are a number of *Psalms* that contain elements of malediction. It seems to this writer that there are at least ten such *Psalms*: 7, 35, 55, 58, 69, 79, 83, 109, 137, and 139.

¹ Garry K. Brantley, “Prayers of Destruction,” *Reason and Revelation* (Montgomery: Apologetics Press, Volume XII, Number 12, December 1992), 45.

² Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964, 1974), 460. As we will see, the Psalmist’s enemies are also God’s enemies.

³ J. A. Motyer, “Imprecatory *Psalms*,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 554.

Several Erroneous Views

There are several alleged solutions to the imprecatory *Psalms* which are inadequate:⁴

1) The liberal or modernist view is that the imprecatory *Psalms* are merely the uninspired words of the authors. No vengeance of God is to be assumed in these cases; rather, it is the vengeance of the fallible writers.

Such a theory, of course, is unacceptable to those who hold to the Biblical teaching of divine inspiration. “All Scripture,” both the Old as well as the New Testament writings, says Paul, “is given by inspiration of God” (2 *Timothy* 3:16-17). Then too, in 2 *Samuel* 23:1-2, we read that “the sweet Psalmist of Israel” spoke by the “Spirit of the LORD...His word was on my tongue.” Further, the *Psalms* of imprecation are quoted in the New Testament by Christ and others as fully inspired (*John* 2:17; 15:25; *Acts* 1:20; *Romans* 11:9-10; 15:3).

2) The Dispensationalist view avers that these *Psalms* are to be understood in light of the inferior ethical concepts of the Old Testament, which was a dispensation of law. This is now an outmoded ethical system. Therefore, the *Psalms* in which we find the invoking of justice, calamity, or curse, have no place in the New Testament era of grace.

There are several problems with this theory. First, the Old Testament system of ethics is not outmoded. In the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (19:5),⁵ the moral

⁴ Michael Bushell, *The Songs of Zion* (Pittsburgh: Crown & Covenant Publications, 1977), 34-37; Johannes G. Vos, “The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory *Psalms*,” *The Westminster Theological Journal*, edited by Paul Woolley and John Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster Theological Seminary, November 1941 to May 1943), Volumes IV and V, 124-130; Brantley, “Prayers of Destruction,” 46-47. The writers listed in this footnote do not adhere to these “inadequate” theories; rather, they claim them to be “inadequate.”

⁵ All references to the Westminster Standards, comprised of

law of the Old Covenant “does forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof; and that not only in regard of the matter contained in it, but also in respect of the authority of God, the Creator, who gave it. Neither does Christ in the gospel any way dissolve, but much strengthen this obligation.”

Second, to simply relegate prayers of imprecation to the Old Testament will not do. The New Testament also contains such prayers. In *Matthew* 23, for example, Jesus pronounces imprecatory “woes” on the scribes and Pharisees. In *Galatians* 1:8-9 and 5:12, we read of Paul “anathematizing” anyone who preaches “any other gospel” besides the apostolic Gospel. In *Revelation* 6:10, the martyred saints cry out: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the Earth?” And in *Revelation* 8 we are told that it is the imprecatory prayers of the saints that brings God’s judgments against His enemies.

3) Some scholars, such as Charles Spurgeon, contend that these *Psalms* are not so much imprecations as they are prophetic in nature.⁶ In this view the Psalmist is not petitioning God’s wrath, he is merely predicting it.

In answer to this contention, it should first be noted that it is true that prophetic utterances regarding God’s vengeance are found in the Psalter. But this does not explain the imperative verbal form that appears in several of the imprecatory *Psalms* (for example, 55:9; 109:6). Another problem is that in some of the imprecations, such as found in *Psalm* 137:8-9, the third person is being used in such a way “that the Psalmist obviously is expressing personal satisfaction over the judgment of wrongdoers, not prophetically revealing pending divine retribution.”⁷

4) A fourth unsatisfactory solution regarding these *Psalms* is the claim that they are to be understood figuratively. That is, the imprecations are addressed, not against human beings, but against spiritual enemies, such as sinful tendencies, temptations, and demonic forces. But this is pure fantasy. There is nothing in the text of the *Psalms* to suggest such a whimsical solution. As Bushell said, those who “see the condemned persons as mere personifications of evil, are guilty of fanciful and illegitimate exegesis.”⁸

the *Confession of Faith* and the *Larger and Shorter Catechisms*, is from *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994). The English has been modernized.

⁶ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (Grand Rapids: Guardian Press, 1981), III: 266. C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch also take the position that although there is a way in which the New Covenant saint can sing the imprecatory *Psalms*, these *Psalms* are primarily to be seen as predictions (*Commentary on the Old Testament*, translated by James Martin [Grand Rapids: reprinted in 1980], V: 74-75).

⁷ Brantley, “Prayers of Destruction,” 46.

⁸ Bushell, *The Songs of Zion*, 35-36.

5) Finally, there is the theory that the maledictions are not those of the Psalmist, but of his enemies. This alleged solution necessitates the implied use of the participle “saying” prior to the imprecations. For example, in *Psalm* 109:6-20, we have the imprecatory prayer of David. And if we add “saying” to verse 5, then we have the imprecations attributed to David’s enemies. Verse 5 would then read: “Thus they [the enemies] have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love, saying....” *Psalm* 2:2 is appealed to here, where the word “saying” is implied by the context. As Brantley pointed out, however, this solution “is strained.” Whereas “the context of *Psalm* 2 indicates that verse three records the sentiments of those who ‘took counsel’ against *Yahweh* (i.e., *Jehovah*) and His Messiah,” *Psalm* 109 indicates no such thing. “Furthermore, this solution would not explain other imprecations in which a plurality of enemies is indicated (compare *Psalms* 35:4-7; 58:3-8; 83:11-17).”⁹

6) Additionally, there is a current-day “misuse” of the imprecatory *Psalms*, wherein churches are found praying maledictory prayers against those who have either left these particular churches or, as teachers at the church school have filed for unemployment benefits. To pray in such a fashion is to do disservice to the teaching of Scripture on this subject.¹⁰ Great care must also be taken here by the church not to overreact to Islamic terrorists by declaring “holy war” against those who have attacked the United States of America. It is one thing to attack America; it is another thing altogether to attack Christ’s church. Thus David can properly pray against the enemies of the Old Testament church: “Arise, O LORD, confront him, cast him down; deliver my life from the wicked with Your sword, with Your hand from men, O LORD, from men of this world who have their portion in this life, and whose belly You fill with Your hidden treasure. They are satisfied with children, and leave the rest of their possession for their babes” (*Psalm* 17:13-14).

The Biblical View

A proper view of the imprecatory *Psalms* recognizes the following Biblical principles:

1) First, as the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* (Q. 1) says: “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” Commenting on the imprecatory sections of *Psalm* 69, John Calvin wrote: “It was a holy zeal for the divine glory which impelled him [the Psalmist] to summon the wicked to God’s judgment seat.”¹¹ This being the case, the imprecatory Psalmists are to be seen as men who expressed a burning desire that God be glorified. They earnestly sought the vindication of God’s name (*Psalm* 9:19-20; 83:16-18). As sin is an affront to the holiness of

⁹ Brantley, “Prayers of Destruction,” 46-47.

¹⁰ For more on this, see John Robbins, “The Reconstructionist Road to Rome,” *The Trinity Review* May-June 1992.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Commentaries*, Volumes 1-22 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), *Commentary on Psalm* 69:22.

God, states David, it must be judged accordingly (*Psalms* 139:19-20).

2) The authors of the Book of *Psalms* were fully aware of the fact that the meting out of vengeance is a divine prerogative. In *Deuteronomy* 32:35, we read: "Vengeance is Mine [God's], and recompense." The imprecations are to be understood as prayers to God, not the intended actions of the Psalmists themselves. This being so, the Psalmist's cause is identified with the cause of God (*Psalms* 139:19-22).¹² The Psalmist, then, is duty bound to pray for the overthrow of God's enemies. Johannes Vos said it this way:

The total destruction of evil, including the judicial destruction of evil men, is the prerogative of the sovereign God, and it is right not only to pray for the accomplishment of this destruction, but even to assist in effecting it when commanded to do so by God Himself.... God is both sovereign and righteous; He possesses the unquestionable right to destroy all evil in His universe; if it is right for God to plan and effect this destruction, then it is right also for the saints to pray for the same.¹³

3) Contrary to the criticism of the skeptics, the attitude of the Psalmists is not one of vindictiveness. David disclaims any such notion in *Psalms* 109:5, where we read: "Thus they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love." On two occasions, when opportunity availed, David declined to take Saul's life (2 *Samuel* 24, 26). Moreover, he even prayed for his enemies when they were in need (*Psalms* 35:12-14). And in *Psalms* 83:16-18, we read that the Psalmist sought the ultimate salvation of the wicked: "Fill their faces with shame, that they may seek Your name, O LORD...that men may know that You, whose name alone is the LORD, are the Most High over all the Earth." Todd Ruddell commented:

The words of the Psalter ought to be understood...not as an expression of an angry author or fulminations of a firebrand, but as the sentiments of God Himself, the thoughts of the Psalmist being raised by that powerful Spirit of prophecy, above mere human vendetta and cursing. The expressions of the Psalmist against sinners are God's expressions. They are the thoughts of His heart.¹⁴

¹² See Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Volume 18, "The Miscellanies" 501-832, edited by Ava Chamberlain (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), Miscellany 640.

¹³ Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," 135-136.

¹⁴ Todd Ruddell, "Psallo," *The Confessional Presbyterian*, edited by Chris Coldwell (Volume 1, 2005), 164.

4) To pray the imprecatory prayers is to pray for the overthrow of Satan and his minions. If God's kingdom is to advance, in accordance with the Lord's Prayer (which believers are enjoined to pray): "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven" (*Matthew* 6:10), then the kingdom of the evil one must be destroyed. God's glory necessitates the destruction of the wicked. Imprecatory prayers aim at just this. The Lord's Prayer is itself a prayer for the overthrow of evil.

5) Along this same line of thought, the inspired writers recognized that God is the only true defense for the elect, as they are being assaulted by the reprobate. Hence, to pray against the Psalmist's enemies is to pray for the help of God's people. In *Psalms* 7:9-10, for instance, we read: "Oh let the wickedness of the wicked come to an end, but establish the just....My defense is of God, who saves the upright in heart."

Conclusion

A Biblical view of the imprecatory *Psalms* does not recognize them as problematic. To invoke divine retribution on the enemies of God and His people is to pray in accordance with the revealed will of God. After all, these *Psalms* are a part of the infallible and inerrant "collection of songs and prayers covering a variety of themes." And they, being as fully inspired as the rest of Scripture, are "profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 *Timothy* 3:16-17).

This being so, Vos correctly concluded:

Instead of being influenced by the sickly sentimentalism of the present day, Christian people should realize that the glory of God demands the destruction of evil...[therefore] instead of being ashamed of the imprecatory Psalms, and attempting to apologize for them and explain them away, Christian people should glory in them and not hesitate to use them in the public and private exercises of the worship of God.¹⁵

Soli Deo Gloria

Update on Clark and His Critics

Clark and His Critics, Volume 7 of *The Works of Gordon H. Clark*, will go to press soon. This is the long awaited republication of *The Philosophy of Gordon H. Clark* edited by Ronald Nash combined with *Clark Speaks From the Grave*. This new volume in the signature series should be out by late spring or early summer. Contents:

¹⁵ Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms" 138.

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