

Lesson 10

The Imprecatory Psalms

One facet of the psalms that has troubled some Christian readers is the fairly common practice of psalm writers calling upon God to curse, punish, or utterly destroy their enemies or the wicked. This type of psalm often is called “imprecatory,” that word derived from “imprecate,” which means “to invoke evil upon, curse.”

Here are some examples of the sort of language that has shocked Christian sensibilities and raised questions in the minds of some about the inspiration and validity of some of the psalms.

Investigate

Review these psalms and see if you can determine the context of the pleas for God to render judgment:

35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, 137, 140

How do you initially feel when you read such calls for such terrible disasters upon one's enemies?

Does it seem righteous, from the point of view of a Christian?

About eighteen of the psalms have some element of imprecation in them, but of the 368 verses that compose these psalms, only 65 verses carry such pleas for divine action.

It is worth observing that these calls for terrible judgment by God never name an individual. They were always against a class of people, leaving open the possibility that if an individual in such a class repented, he could be forgiven and exempted. Also, these classes of people typically were the enemies of God's kingdom, not just personal enemies.

Are They Attributable to a Lower Standard of Morality under the Old Testament?

Some folks, struggling to make these pleas for catastrophes make sense in light of the New Testament, suggest that we must understand them as coming at a time when the moral standard was lower. The suggestion is that the Old Testament's moral standard demanded much less than the covenant of Christ.

Without totally throwing that suggestion aside, it must be observed that the Law of

Moses commanded the people of Israel to love their enemies (Lev. 18:19), and the wisdom literature taught them to feed a hungry enemy (Prov. 25:21-22).

Psalm 55:15

*Let death seize them;
Let them go down alive into hell,
For wickedness is in their dwellings
and among them.*

Psalm 58: 6-8

*Break their teeth in their mouth, O
God!
Break out the fangs of the young
lions, O LORD!*

*Let them flow away as waters which
run continually;
When he bends his bow,
Let his arrows be as if cut in pieces.*

*Let them be like a snail which melts
away as it goes,
Like a stillborn child of a woman,
that they may not see the sun.*

Psalm 109:9-13

*Let his children be fatherless,
And his wife a widow.*

*Let his children continually be
vagabonds, and beg;
Let them seek their bread also from
their desolate places.*

*Let the creditor seize all that he
has,
And let strangers plunder his labor.
Let there be none to extend mercy
to him,
Nor let there be any to favor his
fatherless children.*

*Let his posterity be cut off,
And in the generation following let
their name be blotted out.*

Issue: Do These Calls for Divine Response Conflict with New Testament Teaching?

Many Christians initially are troubled by the so-called imprecatory psalms because they recall clearly the teaching of Jesus, “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matt. 5:44; cf. Luke 6:27, 35).

The Role of Anger

Research what the Bible says about anger. Use an exhaustive concordance.

1. Who is most often described as being angry in the Bible?
2. Are Christians told never to be angry?
3. Can a righteous person not be angry about sin and its impact on friends, family?
4. What is complacency? Is it sinful?

Jesus, dying a torturous death on the cross, appealed to the Father to “forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34). The apostle Peter taught that it is commendable before God to endure grief and suffer wrongfully, that it is in fact the imitation of Jesus Himself (1 Pet. 2:18-24).

Some have sought to ameliorate the presumed difficulty in the psalms by suggesting that the moral standard of the Old Testament age was different, less developed than the morality of Christ and the New Testament, but this is a tenuous argument at best; at worst, just wrong. Notice that personal revenge was forbidden and loving treatment of enemies commanded under the old law just as it is under the new (Lev. 19:17-18; Prov. 24:17; 25:21-22).

A careful analysis and study of Scripture will demonstrate that these psalms are not expressing anything antithetical to God’s standards of righteousness under either covenant, but in fact reflect the type of judgment God has promised through both the ancient prophets and the writers of the New Testament age.

The language is poetic and thus emotionally charged, utilizing vig-

orous or even exaggerated language to express depth of feeling. And, yet, as we shall see, some of that same language was divinely inspired in the voices and pens of the prophets.

He would do (cf. 35:5 to 1:4). They express abhorrence of certain forms of evil, appeal for God’s form of justice, and understand the inseparable connection between sin and punishment.

3. Many of these psalms appear to be uttered by King David. A review of David’s life will illustrate that he was patient and forgiving when personally insulted or harmed. However, when David speaks as king, he speaks as head of the executive and judicial branches of Israel’s government. It was his job to see that justice was done. Also, as God’s “anointed” shepherd-king, actions against him were very often actions against God and God’s will. The psalmists are, in some cases, taking up God’s cause (5:10-11; 21:10-11; 139:19-22). Notice that they speak of the wicked working against God.

4. Punishment of evil-doers is a practice of virtually all nations and peoples. That is one of the primary roles of government. Read Romans 13.

5. Some of the imprecatory psalms are prayers for success in battle, for the destruction of enemies. Don’t we pray for our troops’

Explanations of the Imprecations

1. Observe in the psalms under consideration that the people being cursed are not enemies with regard to trivial matters. They are wicked. They hate the righteous people of God, mock God, and suppress the godly (5:4-6, 9-10; 10:15; 42:3; 94:2-7).

2. It is a mistake to view these imprecatory expressions as pleas for personal vengeance. Rather, they are the voice of moral outrage and indignation, rooted in a knowledge of God’s standards of righteousness and His condemnation of sin. These psalms are prayers for God to vindicate His ways (10:17-18). They are pleas that God do what He has said



success in battle? How can they be successful unless the enemy is killed or otherwise defeated? (See Psalm 144:1-7 as example.)

6. Some of the petitions in the psalms actually use language that demonstrates they are appeals for God to do what He declared prophetically that He would do.

Compare the Psalm with Isaiah 13:16
“Their children also will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; Their houses will be plundered And their wives ravished.”

Psalm 137:8-9

O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed,

Happy the one who repays you as you have served us!

Happy the one who takes and dashes

Your little ones against the rock!

Read Jeremiah 50 and 51 in regard to the manner of judgment God had planned for Babylon.

New Testament Expresses Similar Ideas

Bible students have an incomplete view of New Testament teaching if they view the language of the psalmists as totally inconsistent with Christian faith. The passion

for justice reflected in the psalms is certainly not contrary to the gospel. Modern one-sided gospels may disallow such teaching, but not the true gospel. The apostle Paul clearly taught “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

Homework and Questions

Be sure to do your homework because what you discover will become part of our study and discussion during class.

1. The Old Testament taught “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” (Exod. 21:24). The New Testament teaches that a man shall reap as he sows (Gal. 6:7-9). Is there a difference? _____

2. Make some notes for a prayer you might address to God if your wife was raped by a gang or one of your children was molested or murdered. Try to express to God your feelings, expectations of Him, etc. _____

3. How do you understand the purpose of imprecatory psalms? _____

