

THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS: AN INTERPRETIVE GUIDE

The imprecatory psalms are some of the most shocking words in the Bible. Take Psalm 137:9: “*Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!*” It is hard to imagine cross-stitching that passage on a pillow, and yet these are inspired words of God. How should we understand them?

A Christ-Centered Interpretation

Due to the shocking nature of many of these imprecatory psalms, three primary interpretive responses have been proffered. Some have attempted to dismiss the imprecatory psalms as vengeful cries from a primitive people. Unfortunately, in making this assertion they disregard Scripture’s unity and authority, and they make themselves self-sufficient arbiters of God’s Word. A second approach is similar. In the progress of redemption and revelation, the New Testament imperative to love your enemies has trumped this Old Testament ethic of retribution. While acknowledging the place of these psalms in history, they make them out to be obsolete. The problem again is that this method disjoins the Bible, when in fact the NT interprets these psalms in light of Christ.

A third approach is to read these imprecations in the light of Christ. As we put these Davidic words in Jesus’ mouth, we begin to understand his pleas from the cross. Likewise, we better understand the purpose of these troubled psalms. On this side of the cross, we can read these psalms fearfully as we consider the eschatological retribution that will be poured out on Christ’s aggressors, who have not trusted in his own wrath-bearing atonement. This nuanced approach is most faithful to the Bible and most in accord with the progress of revelation.

A Biblical-Historical Context

To understand these wrathful psalms it is necessary to put them in their proper place in redemptive history. Since the uprising in the garden, all creation has been sentenced under a curse to receive the judgment of God (Gen. 3:14-19; cf. Rom. 8:19-22). Appropriately, the imprecatory psalms excoriate those persons, nations, and societies that wage war with God—in truth, this is all humanity. Simultaneously, the imprecatory psalms assert the coming vindication of God. In Genesis 3:15, a ray of light shines in the cursed skies, “a seed of the woman would crush the head of the seed of the serpent.” This promise is embedded in the context of cosmic conflict—the serpent’s offspring will rage against the children of God (cf. Ps. 2). This spiritual warfare must be seen as the underlining context of the imprecatory psalms.

Carried out in the fullness of time, this head-crushing seed of the women is Jesus Christ. Contending in his life against the powers and principalities, he is hoisted on a cross to die. This act of weakness turns out to be his moment of triumph, for in his death delivers to Satan his death blow (cf. Col. 2:15; Rev. 12). The imprecatory psalms point to this eschatological event (Ps. 69; cf. Matt. 27:34; Jn.

19:28ff). On the cross, Jesus Christ endured the imprecatory wrath called down on the enemies of God, and he did this in order to reconcile enemies of God to the Father (cf. Rom. 5:10). In this light then, the destruction of the Babylonian children in Psalm 137 is seen as imagery depicting the serpent's demise. Moreover, Psalm 137:9, written in under the skies of Babylon, retells the hope of the proto-evangelium, a seed-crushing son. This is also explains the counter-intuitive notion that the destroyer of reptilian infants is "blessed."

Modern sensitivities may militate against such violent language, but the biblical notion of peace comes at the price of blood. The imprecatory psalms are cries of justice for the Righteous God to carry out his judgment. This was done through military conflict in the OT (i.e. the language of the imprecatory psalms), and in the NT it was finished on the cross. Today, as we read these challenging verses we are confronted to ask ourselves, "What Spirit shall we hear?" The spirit of this age tells us to dismiss these hard sayings as archaic folly, but the Spirit of Christ points us to swallow these bitter words and look to the cross and to the end of the age when Jesus will come again to put all things under his feet.

Application As we close, consider three applications: 1) Renewing our minds with the message of these psalms affirms in our own hearts the righteousness of God and the sinfulness of humanity; 2) Embracing these imprecations moves us to exalt God in his mercy and in his justice; and 3) Petitioning God according to these Psalms prepares us for the Day of Judgment, and prompts us to cling to the cross.

May we this week cry out to God, Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus! And may we tell everyone we know how to escape the coming wrath foretold in the imprecatory psalms