

Urban Legends – Part 7

The Imprecatory Psalms are Horrible Models for Christian Prayer

Psalm 109

1. We read Psalms devotionally and these just don't vibe with that.
2. These prayers were only appropriate for those who lived during the Old Testament times.
3. These prayers endorse a hatred that contradicts Jesus' teachings to love one another and one's enemies.
4. These prayers are at odds with Paul's exhortation to "bless and do not curse" in Romans 12:14.
 - Highly figurative and hyperbolic in language.
 - Cries for God's judgment and justice in times of extreme injustice and violent oppression.
 - Informed by God's own revealed standards of justice.
 - Not reflective of an ethic that allowed Israel to hate its enemies.
 - Pray for God's ultimate judgment to come on the ungodly in the final judgment.
 - Empathize with the oppressed and relieve suffering.
 - Express righteous anger in holy ways.

West Valley Church
7/31/2022
April Manning

Urban Legends Part 7

Today we're continuing in our sermon series on Urban Legends where we debunk common myths surrounding Scripture or Church History. The urban legend we'll be looking at today is the theory that imprecatory Psalms are horrible models for Christian prayer. Now if you've never heard of the word, "imprecatory," you're not alone. I was even unfamiliar with this term, but I knew it didn't sound good. This word just doesn't sound nice, right? It has a negative connotation to it and an element of doom when you pronounce it out loud, "imprecatory." I was familiar with other types of Psalms, you know, the nice sounding ones, such as the Psalms of Praise that make it into our worship songs, such as Psalm 136, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good. His love endures forever," and the Psalms of Thanksgiving that get advertised in magazines! In an online article by *Country Living* dated August 27, 2021, you'll find a headline that says, "19 Best Thanksgiving Psalms to Put You in the Right Frame of Mind."¹

These are the Psalms that are typically at the forefront of our minds, because they sound good, they make us feel good – as the article was promoting, and these nice words sell, in all honesty. So to be unaware of imprecatory Psalms isn't all your fault. It's what we've been conditioned to glance over when we come across them in Scripture, as others before us have done. We haven't been taught how to engage with these Psalms, so today we're going to learn what these Psalms are, unravel the legend that says these are horrible models of prayer, and learn how to engage these Psalms and use them.

What Are Imprecatory Psalms?

Since I was even unfamiliar with these Psalms, I had to go look up what imprecatory meant and what these Psalms were about.

According to the book, rightly titled, "Hard Saying of the Old Testament," there are six Psalms classified this way – Psalm 55, 59, 69, 79, 109 and 137, and most of them are attributed to David. Imprecatory psalms are prayers that plead with God to bring justice when faced with injustice, calamity, or curses. They see God as being the ultimate, righteous judge, and plead with God to bring justice in situations where matters have become grossly distorted.² Many of these prayers say things that we find disturbing.

¹ <https://www.countryliving.com/life/inspirational-stories/a33237483/thanksgiving-psalms/>

² Walter Kaiser, Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 172.

To give us an example of one, let me read for us Psalm 109. This is a prayer written by King David in response to being falsely accused of causing an innocent man's death.³ It's pretty lengthy, so instead of asking you to stand, I want you to take a moment instead to find a posture of meditation. As this is a prayer, I want us to hear it as a prayer and sit with it as if we were praying it. Psalm 109, a Psalm of David.

My God, whom I praise, do not remain silent, for people who are wicked and deceitful have opened their mouths against me; they have spoken against me with lying tongues. With words of hatred they surround me; they attack me without cause. In return for my friendship they accuse me, but I am a man of prayer. They repay me evil for good, and hatred for my friendship.

Appoint someone evil to oppose my enemy; let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is tried, let him be found guilty, and may his prayers condemn him. May his days be few; may another take his place of leadership. May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes. May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor. May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children. May his descendants be cut off, their names blotted out from the next generation. May the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord; may the sin of his mother never be blotted out. May their sins always remain before the Lord, that he may blot out their name from the earth. For he never thought of doing a kindness, but hounded to death the poor and the needy and the brokenhearted. He loved to pronounce a curse—may it come back on him. He found no pleasure in blessing—may it be far from him. He wore cursing as his garment; it entered into his body like water, into his bones like oil. May it be like a cloak wrapped about him, like a belt tied forever around him.

May this be the Lord's payment to my accusers to those who speak evil of me.

But you, Sovereign Lord, help me for your name's sake; out of the goodness of your love, deliver me. For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me. I fade away like an evening shadow; I am shaken off like a locust. My knees give way from fasting; my body is thin and gaunt. I am an object of scorn to my accusers; when they see me, they shake their heads. Help me, Lord my God; save me according to your unfailing love. Let them know that it is your hand, that you, Lord, have done it. While they curse, may you bless; may those who attack me be put to shame, but may your servant rejoice. May my accusers be clothed with disgrace and wrapped in shame as in a cloak.

With my mouth I will greatly extol the Lord; in the great throng of worshipers I will praise him. For he stands at the right hand of the needy, to save their lives from those who would condemn them. (Psalm 109)

³ David Thompson, Barry Ross & Alex Varughese, *Psalms 73-150: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 2020), 244-245.

I think there's been a shift in the room. Do you feel it? There's so much to unpack here. What did you feel as I read it? What did you in the way your body reacted to what was being read? You can dialogue with me here – please do.

The Legend

Unfortunately, this is one of the reasons why the legend has it that imprecatory Psalms are horrible models for Christian Prayer. The legend promotes...

1. We read Psalms devotionally and these just don't vibe with that.

As we've felt as I read this Psalm, they disturb us. They make us uncomfortable...

2. These prayers were only appropriate for those who lived during the Old Testament times.

According to this theory, these vicious and vindictive prayers are reflective of the inferior ethos of the old covenant and were appropriate during the Old Testament of which God was more wrathful. Followers of Jesus should not offer these types of prayers to the gracious and merciful God of the New Testament."⁴

This gets into troublesome territory, as it promotes the perspective that the God of the Old Testament is not the same as the God of the New Testament. We do not have two different gods. We have one God that reigns from the very beginning of creation to now. We need to see the Bible as ONE book, unfolding God's redemptive purposes, mission, and faithfulness throughout...

3. These prayers endorse a hatred that contradicts Jesus's teachings to love one another and one's enemies.⁵

In Matthew 5:43-45, Jesus says:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:43-45)

And in Luke 6:27-28, he says:

⁴ David Croteau and Gary Yates, *Urban Legends of the Old Testament: 40 Common Misconceptions* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2019), 145.

⁵ Ibid.

“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.” (Luke 6:27-28)

Obviously, Jesus said it, and we can't reconcile what these Psalms say with what Jesus says...

4. These prayers are at odds with Paul's exhortation to “bless and do not curse” in Romans 12:14).⁶

There Paul says, “bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”

Unraveling the Legend

At first glance and with these arguments it seems that these prayers contradict everything God stands for, right? Maybe you've glanced over them as well as you've read through the Psalms. You're just not sure what to do with them, so you read it and move on. Have y'all done that? It's okay. I remember doing that too. Usually my thinking was, well, it's here for some reason, so I'll read it to read it and move on.

But when we look at how these Psalms appear and were used, I think we'll come away with an appreciation for them, maybe not in their entirety, but at least move towards seeing them in a more useful and compassionate light.

First, it's important for us to know that these Psalms are often...

– *Highly figurative and hyperbolic in language.*⁷

You know when you get upset, your emotions heighten and you say things you don't necessarily mean, and you exaggerate a bit? I remember in pre-marital counseling our dear beloved professor told Dan and I that whenever we have disagreements or get upset with one another, it's best to stay away from using absolutes and exaggerated language, because it just doesn't help and it's usually not realistic. I didn't think I did that until one day we were having a disagreement and I said something like, you always do this...obviously, that wasn't the case, but it was said! And it was true!!! If you're parents, or if you're a sibling, I'm sure you've heard similar things said, like, “You always have the remote,” “you always get to choose,” “you always get more than me...” etc. These things are said when we're upset.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 146.

That's what is happening a lot of the time in these Psalms, but the writers of these Psalms are experiencing 100 times the injustices we face when we get upset about something. So you can only imagine why this language is used and why it occurs here. These writers are experiencing a ton of oppression, or violence, or injustice, that they can't take it anymore and they pray to God feeling all these things in these very violent and disturbing situations that they exaggerate in their responses. It's a language that helps them communicate how they feel and what they're experiencing.

Secondly, these Psalms are...

- *Cries for God's **judgement** and **justice** in times of extreme **injustice** and violent **oppression**.*⁸

Let's take a closer look at Psalm 109 to help us understand this a bit more. Earlier I said the context for this Psalm was that King David was being falsely accused of murdering a poor and needy man. When we actually study this Psalm, what David is describing is actually what his accusers have said *ABOUT HIM!!* From verses 6–19, he is rephrasing what his accusers have said. They want someone from the court system to be his “defense attorney,” as they ask for someone to be appointed against him, someone who is evil. This is before he is even given a fair trial or given an opportunity to defend himself. They want David to die; they wish evil on him and his family – they want his family to suffer too – his wife to become a widow and his children to be fatherless. Not only would they be without a husband and father, but they would no longer be protected, as it says, “may a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor.” His wife and children could be seized as slaves and driven from their home.⁹

What's more? They want no one to be kind to him or take pity on his children. They want punishment on him to extend beyond his present life, in both the past and the future – they want his mother's and father's sins to be remembered always before God and for their names to never be remembered on earth; they want his descendants names to be blotted out.¹⁰

I'm not sure what kind of emotion this stirs up in you, but to think of someone accusing me of all this and wishing all this evil upon me, and asking to declare me guilty without the right of a fair trial makes me sick. But this is happening in our day and age. Have you read the book or seen the movie, *Just Mercy*? I've only watched it once, and it was painful to watch, to see all the injustice happen and take place. The film is an adaptation of the book written by Bryan Stevenson who is a public interest lawyer and works to defend those wrongly convicted of murder, namely the poor in Alabama who cannot afford legal representation and aren't given fair trials. The book and movie highlight the injustices in the court system and the systemic racism people of color face today. The case the movie follows reveals that the person Mr. Stevenson was defending was tried by nearly an all-

⁸ Gordon & Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*, 179.

⁹ Thompson, Ross, Varughese, 243.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 244.

white jury and evidence came to light that testimony against his defendant was fabricated by a white-male in exchange for a lighter sentence himself.

According to the Equal Justice Initiative, an organization that Stevenson started, Stevenson and his staff have “won over 140 wrongly condemned prisoners on death row, and have won relief for hundreds of others wrongly convicted or unfairly sentenced.”¹¹ If this many people have been wrongly condemned or put on death row, I can only imagine how many have been innocently killed. Isn’t this what this Psalm is addressing? Not having the right to a fair trial? Being falsely accused? Wishing the death penalty upon someone and taking no pity on their families? It sounds awful, but it’s still happening in our day and age. We can’t turn a blind eye to it if we want to see justice take place. We can’t turn a blind eye to these Psalms that call out the evil and plead to God for justice.

Thirdly, these Psalms were...

- *Informed by **God’s** own revealed **standards** of justice.*¹²

We have to understand contextually, that David and the other Psalmists were calling on God to live up to his covenantal promises that they would have known about from Abraham and the Mosaic Law. In Genesis 12:3, God promised Abraham that he would, “bless those who bless you and curse anyone who treats you with contempt.” In Deuteronomy 19:16-21, God gives the order that “if a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse someone of a crime, the two people involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the LORD before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against a fellow Israelite, then due to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party...show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”

These standards God revealed were no light matter and were established to regulate punishment of crimes in ancient Israel.¹³ This was God’s way of seeking justice and protecting the people God was choosing to use to be a blessing to the nations and seek redemption and restoration through. While this style differs from how God informs us justice is to be handled today, it is still the same God seeking justice for God’s people through.

Lastly, these Psalms are...

- *Not reflective of an **ethic** that allowed Israel to **hate** its enemies.*¹⁴

¹¹ Equal Justice Initiative, Just Mercy: Selected Discussion Questions, 2.

¹² Croteau & Yates, 147.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

It's important to note that these sayings we find disturbing are not statements of personal vendetta, but they are utterances of zeal for the kingdom of God and his glory...the attacks which provoked these prayers were not from personal enemies; rather, they were rightfully seen as attacks against God and especially his representatives in the promised line of the Messiah. Thus, David and his office bore the brunt of most of these attacks, and this was tantamount to an attack on God and his kingdom.¹⁵

The threats to the advancement of God's kingdom elicited such a prayer from the people God was working through to bring about peace, justice, kindness, gentleness, love, mercy, and forgiveness for the sake of the continuation of God's rule and reign. These prayers are less about getting back at people in kind and more about asking for God's help to sustain the mission of God.

But, we can't help but notice at other places where these imprecatory Psalms appear, David and the other Psalmists "protest that they have kind thoughts toward these same evil-doers."¹⁶

I like how *The Message* frames David's thoughts in Psalm 35:11-14. It reads:

"Hostile accusers appear out of nowhere, they stand up and badger me. They pay me back *misery for mercy*, leaving my soul empty. When they were sick, I dressed in black; instead of eating, I prayed. My prayers were like lead in my gut, *like I'd lost my best friend*, my brother. I paced, *distraught as a motherless child*, hunched and heavyhearted." (Psalm 35:11-14)

So you see, these prayers are not emphasizing or advocating a hate speech towards our enemies. These writers of these Psalms are even feeling at a loss for those who are slandering them or wishing ill upon them. Even in the midst of these hatred cries, those targeted are seeking and desiring peace, they're feeling the loss and heaviness that God feels, and these prayers help us have a language to speak to God about what we see taking place or are experiencing. These prayers are also very faith-based, as they are **directed towards God** and are requests to God. David didn't take it upon himself to seek justice for those who were accusing him. **David sought God** and asked for God to bring judgment.

What do we do with these prayers? How can we use them today?

As I've said, these prayers give us a language to use when we feel such injustices in our lives or in our world. While we do live on the other side of Jesus' resurrection and have been taught to follow in his example in laying down for another rather than taking lives for the advancement of the gospel, we are still up against the presence of systemic sin and evil in our world today. "Jesus did not eradicate human wickedness;"¹⁷ Jesus gave us a taste of it

¹⁵ Walter Kaiser, Jr., 172.

¹⁶ Ibid., 173.

¹⁷ Croteau & Yates, 149.

and gave us the ability to overcome it through dying to our sin, rising again, and sending the gift of the Holy Spirit to make us new, but we have to die to our sin and allow Jesus to work in us and purify our hearts and minds. We also are awaiting Christ's return to make all things new, but until then, to NOT recognize these prayers as a Christian model for prayer would be inconsistent, and what we can do is...

- ***Pray for God's ultimate judgment to come on the ungodly in the final judgment.***

I've been talking about imprecations in the book of Psalms, but I think it's helpful for you to know that we see them occur in other places in the Bible, and in places in the New Testament where the apostles, Paul and John are asking for God's judgment to come upon the ungodly.

In Galatians 1:8-9, Paul writes, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse," and he repeats it again. In 1 Corinthians 16: 22, Paul finishes his message to the church in Corinth with "If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed!" Obviously, Paul here is very concerned about the preaching and living out the gospel that he makes these statements, but again, it's important for the continuation of the advancement of God's kingdom, and he lets it be between God and that person making those false statements.

In Revelation 6:11-12, the Apostle John writes of his vision of martyrs gathered around the throne of God, asking in a loud voice:

"How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little while longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been." (Revelation 6:11-12)

While we wait for God's final judgement to come, we can pray to God that God will provide justice in the final judgment upon the ungodly and all the injustices we are incurring, but this doesn't mean we have to sit idly by and take what is happening as we wait.

When we come across these prayers, we're motivated to...

- ***Empathize with the oppressed and relieve suffering.***¹⁸

To NOT recognize these prayers as models of Christian prayer would be to communicate to those who are suffering, who are persecuted, who are facing injustices, that they just need

¹⁸ Wenham, 177-78.

to suck it up and get over it. But when we come across these prayers, we're faced with the very realness of what is going on in the world beyond West Valley.

Mass shootings, government upheaval, storming the White House, human trafficking, genocide, beheading of Christians in the Middle East, the war on Ukraine, are some of the things that come to mind when we read these Psalms considering our history over the last 100 years that brings forth from us a justified and righteous anger that can be appropriately communicated to God through prayers such as these.

Knowing all this, we have a responsibility to do something about it. Praying is one thing, but these prayers also lead us to take action, they lead us to be creative in creating initiatives that work. Organizations like the Equal Justice Initiative of Bryan Stevenson that works to serve the poor and those who are often rejected fair trails; the International Justice Mission that seeks to "protect people in poverty from violence...[and] to combat trafficking and slavery, violence against women and children, and police abuse of power;"¹⁹ Everytown and Sandy Hook Promise that seek to put a stop to gun violence and protect children from gun violence;²⁰ and many others, even including our own denomination's organization, Nazarene Compassionate Ministries, that "partners with local Nazarene congregations around the world to clothe, shelter, feed, heal, educate and live in solidarity with those who suffer under oppression, injustice, violence, poverty, hunger, and disease."²¹

When we're faced with all this, we're bound to feel angry, and that's okay. These prayers enable us to...

– ***Express righteous anger in holy ways.***

It's okay to be angry, it's okay to be upset that there is sin in this world. That's good! That's the Holy Spirit at work convicting us, letting us know this is not what was ever wanted or desired, this is not good. Having an anger against these things that are evil and sinful can be expressed in righteous and holy ways through turning to the one who alone is JUST, the one who can sympathize with our hearts against everything that we face. It's not healthy nor desired to cast off these feelings or to keep them bottled up inside. When we do that, we communicate a feel-good theology, that doesn't allow for us to feel sorrow, or pain, or anger. We communicate that it's only about rainbows and butterflies. We communicate what people are experiencing in real ways is not in fact valued. But that is not Christian. That is not Christlike. That is certainly not what Christ experienced. We need to acknowledge these real hurts and pains and injustices, name them, get righteously angry about them, plead to God about them, because we know that the ONE who does judge, is faithful, is listening, and is with us through it all.

¹⁹ <https://www.ijm.org/about-ijm>

²⁰ <https://www.everytown.org>; <https://www.sandyhookpromise.org>

²¹ <https://ncm.org/who-we-are#our-mission>

Lastly, we cannot pray these prayers, asking for the judgement of the wicked and unrighteous, without praying for our own sin and unrighteousness to be purged from our hearts. Take a deep look inside of yourself. Ask God, “are there any areas that are hindering me from living a life of love?” And ask God, “Will you search my heart and call to mind anything that has become a stone in my heart, or any unrighteous behavior or actions I’ve engaged in?” Repent, ask for forgiveness, and turn from those things.

Response

I’m going to invite the worship team up and lead us in a time of response. I’ve asked them to sing and play the song, “Great Are You Lord.” It’s one that we’ve done a fair amount of times in church, and one you may know well, and as they sing and play it; I want you to meditate on the lyrics and make this song your prayer. Maybe you sit and listen, maybe you stand and sing. Engage with the song as you feel led, and make note especially when we get to the bridge – pay attention to the words that proclaim, “all the earth will shout your praise, our hearts will cry these bones will sing, ‘Great are you, Lord.’” In return of what the accusers are saying about David, David has become, “poor and needy, his heart wounded within him. He fades away like an evening shadow and shaken off like a locust. His knees give way from fasting and his body is thin and gaunt.”²² Even when David is comparing himself to being almost nothing but bones, he cries out to God and remains steadfast in God’s faithfulness. May we do likewise – may we recognize our weakness and dependence on God; may we bring our pleadings and requests to God; may we turn our holy anger towards God and cry out to the One that stands at our right hand and is faithful to be just. Worship team will you lead us.

Closing words

Do something with me. I want us to all say the word sad together. I’ll count us off with 1, 2, 3 and then we’ll all say, “sad.” Ready? 1...2...3... “sad.”

“You give life, you are love. You bring light to the darkness. You give hope, you restore, every heart that is broken. Great are you, Lord.”

Benediction

Numbers 6: 24 – 26:

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.

²² Psalm 109: 22-24, NIV.