

DOCTRINE OF IMPRECATORY PRAYER

Introduction – Psalms are like prayers. The difference is that the psalms were put to music and sung by the people of God in OT times. They were directed to the LORD and not man. How do we understand the psalms that contain imprecations?

The application of any doctrine of the Bible depends largely upon one's interpretation. This is especially true of the application of the imprecatory Psalms. If one interprets the imprecatory Psalms as allegories, then imprecatory phrases like, "dashing the little ones against the stones" (Ps 137:9) could mean:

the infantile beginnings of small indulgences, small resentments, which may one day become dipsomania or settled hatred, but which woo us and wheedle us with special pleadings and seem so tiny, so helpless that in resisting them we feel we are being cruel to animals. . . . Against all such pretty infants (the dears have such winning ways) the advice of the Psalm is the best. Knock the little bastards' brains out. And `blessed' he who can, for it's easier said than done.¹

This approach to the imprecatory Psalms yields a highly subjective meaning of Scripture. The meaning of Scripture, especially the meaning of the imprecatory Psalms, would then depend largely upon the imagination of the interpreter. This is similar to the allegorization of the Bible. This view on understanding imprecatory psalms must be rejected.

In order to understand imprecatory psalms, let us find out what exactly an imprecatory psalm is.

I. What is an Imprecatory Psalm?

Chalmers Martin says that the term "imprecatory Psalms" is misleading because it seems to imply there is a corpus of Psalms in which imprecation forms the chief elements.² According to Martin this is not the case. He points out that

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 in a single verse.³

¹C. S. Lewis, **Reflections on the Psalms**, (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd., 1958), 136. Lewis considers the imprecatory portions of the Psalms as devilish and full of "festering, gloating, undisguised" hatred. If we condone or approve them then we are considered wicked, worse if we try to justify similar passions in ourselves (cf. Lewis, 20, 22).

²Chalmers Martin, "The Imprecations in the Psalms," The Princeton Theological Review 1 (1903):537. This work was reprinted in **Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation**, compiled and edited by Walter C Kaiser, Jr, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972).

³Ibid. Martin claims that "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". (cf. p. 537)

He prefers the term "imprecations in the Psalms" rather than "imprecatory Psalms". Although Martin's distinction is observably correct, that there is not one psalm which is completely imprecatory, it is not the quantity of imprecations within a psalm that makes it an imprecatory psalm. The existence of psalms that contain imprecations makes the use of the phrase "the imprecatory Psalms" legitimate.

Joseph Hammond sees an obvious distinction between imprecations and comminations (i.e. "threats of punishment") within the list of imprecatory Psalms. He views imprecations as "expressions of the hope, the wish, the prayer, that some judgment, some punishment, some misfortune, may befall certain persons".⁴ Comminations are statements on the part of the writers of the Psalms of their belief that some judgment, some punishment, some misfortune, either has befallen or will befall certain persons, on account of their real or supposed misdeeds.⁵ The former are petitions to God that some specific evil may happen to the enemies of God or the psalmists. The latter are declarations of what will happen as a result of their sins whether or not the psalmists desire it to happen.

Hammond's proposal is difficult to defend simply because the distinction between imprecations and comminations in the psalms is too subjective. He bases his distinction on the motives behind the utterances in these psalms, saying that the authors of comminations "may or may not have been solicitous for the calamity which he foretells",⁶ whereas the authors of imprecations "*must* have been solicitous of it (the calamity), for he prays for it".⁷ It is nearly impossible to say whether one psalm is a prayer and another is not.⁸ Therefore Hammond's distinction has to be rejected as well.

The definition of an imprecatory psalm adopted in this paper is based upon J Carl Laney's definition of an imprecation. He says that,

an imprecation is an invocation of judgment, calamity, or curse uttered against one's enemies, or the enemies of God. . . . Crucial to the definition of an imprecation is that it (a) must be an invocation-prayer or address to God, and (b) must contain a request that one's enemies or the enemies of Yahweh be judged and justly punished.⁹

⁴Joseph Hammond, "The Vindictive Psalms Vindicated," **The Expositor** vol. 3 (1876):29.

⁵Hammond, 29.

⁶Ibid., 30

⁷Ibid., the emphasis is Hammond's.

⁸Chapter One above.

⁹J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," **Bibliotheca Sacra** (Jan-Mar, 1981): 35-36. Examples of an imprecation are: Numbers 10:35-the morning prayer of Moses; Judges 5:31-the song of Deborah and Barak; Jeremiah 11:20; 15:15; 17:18; 18:21-23; and 20:12-Jeremiah repeatedly used imprecation against his enemies. Hammond also cites Acts 13:10-11; 23:3; 1 Corinthians 16:22; Galatians 1:8-9; 5:12; and 2 Timothy 4:14 as examples of New Testament imprecation. (p. 36)

Based upon Carl Laney's definition, the psalms which contain an imprecation or imprecations can certainly be called imprecatory psalms, of which Psalms 69 and 137 are such.¹⁰

II. Identification of the Imprecatory Psalms

Opinion varies as to the number and identity of the imprecatory Psalms. Based upon the above definition, there are at least nine imprecatory Psalms: Psalms 7; 35; 58; 59; 69; 83; 109; 137; and 139.¹¹ An examination of these psalms reveals that the imprecatory element is a leading or major feature and is crucial to the theme of the Psalms. Therefore, psalms like Psalms 69 and 137 are definitely called imprecatory psalms.¹²

III. An Examination of the Hermeneutical Approaches to the Imprecatory Psalms

This section describes and evaluates only four of the main approaches to the understanding and application of the imprecatory Psalms to believers' lives today.¹³ There are too many interpretations to consider them all.

A. Principle of Inferior Old Testament Spiritual Life

J W Beardslee argues that the Old Testament saints lived inferiorly prior to the full light of the truth as taught in the New Testament. Their theology is not as developed and

¹⁰The choice of this broad definition of the imprecatory psalm is deliberate since this is not a paper on the determination of what constitutes an imprecatory psalm.

¹¹Ibid., 36. Meredith G. Kline lists Psalms 7, 35, 55, 59, 69, 79, 109 and 137 as imprecatory psalms. [**The Structure of Biblical Authority**, 2nd. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 161.] Chester K. Lehman lists Psalms 7, 35, 37, 50, 52, 54, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 92, 101, 104, 109, 125, 129, 137, 139 and 145. [**Biblical Theology**, vol. 1 (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1971), 439.] Robert Henry Pfeiffer lists Psalms 5-7, 9-11, 17-18, 28, 31, 34-35, 37, 40, 52, 54, 58, 59, 63, 69-71, 73, 75, 83, 86, 91-92, 94, 112, 118, 120, 137, 140, 141 and 145-147. [**Introduction to the Old Testament**, (NY:Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1941), 638-9.] Johannes G. Vos lists Psalms 55, 59, 69, 79, 109 and 137. ["The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," **Westminster Theological Journal** 4/2 (May, 1942):123.]

¹²The use of the form-critical analysis of the psalms to determine what constitutes an imprecatory psalm or, as this analysis calls them, psalms of lament will not be considered in this thesis. The reason is that in order for form-critical analysis to determine what constitutes the form of an imprecatory psalm, psalms containing imprecations have to be analyzed. The analysis of these psalms with imprecations in them is outside the purview of this thesis. Cf. J. H. Wevers, "A Study of the Form Criticism of Traditional Complaint Psalms," **Vetus Testamentum** 6 (1956):80-96; Walter Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life," **Interpretation** 28 (January, 1974):3-19; and Roland E. Murphy, "A New Classification of Literary Forms in the Psalms," **Catholic Biblical Quarterly** 21 (1959):83-87.

¹³For greater detail on the different approaches to interpreting the imprecatory psalms, see Frederic C. Putnam's thesis, which discusses a total of seven schools of interpretation of the imprecatory psalms: "Imprecation and Righteousness in Psalm 35", Unpublished Master of Sacred Theology Thesis, Biblical Theological Seminary, Hatfield, Pennsylvania, 1980, 10-26.

therefore New Testament ethical teaching and practice should not be expected of them.¹⁴ Scofield concurs with this approach when he says,

The imprecatory Psalms are the cry of the oppressed in Israel for *justice*--a cry appropriate and right in the early people of God, . . . but a cry unsuited for the church, a heavenly people who have taken their place with a rejected and crucified Christ (Luke 9:52-55).¹⁵

Evaluation -- This approach results in a stilted understanding and eventual rejection of the imprecatory Psalms for today's believers. It is incorrect because the Old Testament does provide adequate guidelines for ethical conduct comparable if not equal to those taught in the New Testament.¹⁶ As Carl Laney aptly states,

Christians do enjoy the benefits of progressive revelation, but that progress is not from error to truth; instead, it is a progression from incomplete revelation to a more full and complete revelation or divine disclosure.¹⁷

B. The Imprecations are Prophetic

Barnes suggests that some of the imprecatory Psalms are prophetic,¹⁸ which immediately removes the ethical problem and shifts the responsibility of the imprecation onto God. The support for this approach is that some imprecations are quoted in the New Testament and therefore *all* the imprecations are prophetic.¹⁹ Interpreters who adopt this approach, however, will have little or no difficulty understanding and applying those imprecatory Psalms which are not quoted in the New Testament. For example John Calvin, who uses this approach, comments on Psalm 137:8-9 that

Incredible as it might appear that any calamity should overtake so mighty an empire as Babylon then was, and impregnable as it was generally considered being, he sees in the

¹⁴J. W. Beardslee, "The Imprecatory Element in the Psalms," **Presbyterian and Reformed Review** 8 (1897):496.

¹⁵**Scofield Reference Bible**, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1945), 599.

¹⁶Some Scripture references which teach ethical conduct similar to the New Testament are: Leviticus 19:17-"Love thy neighbor as thyself" stated negatively; Proverbs 20:22; cf. 24:29; Deuteronomy 32:35 -- Vengeance belongs to God; Proverbs 25:21-command to feed thy enemies.

¹⁷Carl Laney, 39.

¹⁸Barnes, vol. 1, xxx. John Calvin adopted this approach in his interpretation of Psalm 137 when he says that the prophet (psalmist) is speaking of future events, discerning the coming judgment of God. [**Commentary on the Book of Psalms**, trans. by James Anderson, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), 189, 197.]

¹⁹Some of the imprecatory psalms quoted in the New Testament are: Psalms 69:25 and 109:8 cf. Acts 1:20; Psalm 69:22-23, cf. Rom. 11:9-10.

glass of the Word its destruction and overthrow. He calls upon all God's people to do the same and by faith from the elevation of heaven's oracles, to despise the pride of that abandoned city.²⁰

Evaluation -- Quotations of a few imprecatory Psalms in the New Testament do not make *all* the imprecatory Psalms prophetic. Furthermore, when the imperfect form of the verb is preceded by an imperative, the imperfect is often translated as a jussive (Ps 69:25-6).²¹ The imprecation in such cases becomes a wish or prayer that it may happen rather than a declaration of a future event. For example, Psalm 137:8-9 involves a third person¹ which indicates that the psalmist is not making a prophetic utterance but expressing his own feeling as one who will be happy when judgment overtakes the evildoers. [literal translation of verses 8 and 9 – "O daughter of Babylon, who will be dealt violently with, O the happiness of the ones who will reward you your recompense just as you have dealt fully to us. O the happiness of him that will take hold and dash your little children against the rock."] (emphasis added)

C. The Imprecations are Human Emotions

This approach says that the psalmist is "God's wholly committed man, yet a man who is estranged from God's spirit".²² According to this view, the imprecatory Psalms express the full humanity of the psalmists who love God, or Jerusalem, or an attribute of God, and who hate God's enemies passionately, to the extent that they wish that those enemies' children be dashed against the rocks (cf. Psalm 137:8-9). Bright asserts that the psalm must not be read and received as God's word for today's believers outside of the light of the gospel.²³ The imprecation of the psalmists is "unworthy and sub-Christian" but a record of the frustration of the whole man who needs to confront Christ.²⁴

Evaluation -- Although this view offers a New Testament understanding and application to today's believers, it violates the inspiration of Scripture. This approach appears to deny the divine authorship of the imprecatory psalms by distinguishing between the human author (as one estranged from God) and the divine. Such a dichotomy rejects Scripture's teaching of the mysterious, unfathomable unity between the divine and human authors of the Bible (cf. Acts 4:25; 1Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:16).

D. The Imprecatory Psalms are the Prayers of Christ

James E. Adams argues that all the imprecatory Psalms are really the prayers of the

²⁰Calvin, 197.

²¹GKC, 109 f.

²²John Bright, **The Authority of the Old Testament**, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), 238.

²³Bright, 238.

²⁴Ibid., Although Bright dealt only with Psalm 137, presumably he would apply the same principles of interpretation to the other imprecatory psalms.

Lord Jesus Christ.²⁵ He says

The Lord Jesus Christ is praying these prayers of vengeance. The prayers that cry out for the utter destruction of the psalmist's enemies can only be grasped when heard from the loving lips of our Lord Jesus. These prayers signal an alarm to all who are still enemies of King Jesus. His prayers will be answered! . . . All the enemies of the Lord need to hear these prayers of Christ proclaimed today. They are not the prayers of a careless and compassionless tyrant, but the effectual prayers of the Lamb of God who bore the curse of God for the sins of all who bow their knee to Him. The wrath of the psalms must be preached as the wrath of the Lamb of God. God's kingdom is at war!²⁶

Adams cautions against anyone praying these Psalms for their own personal prayers. Yet he adds,

Never may God's people pray so out of a spirit of personal vengeance against their enemies. Do we need to be reminded again of our Commander's orders to love even our enemies? Without assistance how can we ever righteously pray this prayer? I answer this question unequivocally: *We never can!* We cannot pray this prayer on our own . . . not because we are too *good*, but rather because we are too prone to evil! Yet we must *learn* to pray it.²⁷

Evaluation -- To say that the imprecatory Psalms are in reality the prayers of Christ collapses the context in which these Psalms were written. It is tantamount to committing the error of spiritualizing the text. How can the prayers of David suddenly become the prayers of the Lord? When David wrote Psalm 59, he said that it was written "when Saul sent, and they watched the house to kill him."²⁸ This is the historical context of the psalm which will have to be ignored if Adams's approach is accepted. This approach implies a redefinition of inspiration for the imprecatory Psalms where the human writers become no more than typewriters. But divine inspiration does involve the human authors, and may be defined as

the work of the Holy Spirit of God in causing the writers of Scriptures to give forth the Word of God without error. The writers were inspired in the sense that the Holy

²⁵James E. Adams, **War Psalms of the Prince of Peace**, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1991), 33.

²⁶Ibid., 33-34. Temper Longman III seems to support this approach when he proposes a broader understanding of messianic psalms, "the term 'messianic psalm' may be used in one of two ways. In a general sense, a messianic psalm is simply a psalm which anticipates the Messiah. We will soon see that all the psalms are messianic in this sense. Some people, though, believe that a few psalms are messianic in the narrow sense. That is, some psalms are prophetic and have no direct message of significance for the Old Testament period. They only predict the coming Messiah . . . While no psalm is exclusively messianic in the narrow sense, all the psalms look forward to Jesus Christ." [**How to Read the Psalms**, (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 67-8.]

²⁷Adams, 56. Emphasis original.

²⁸Psalm 59:1.

Spirit worked through them. The writings are inspired in that they are the product of the work of the Holy Spirit through the writers."²⁹

View adopted – The view that is adopted in this paper is close to View D. Psalms like all the other books of the Bible are inspired by God but the individual writers' personalities are not destroyed. They were more than just type writers. The doctrine of inspiration is clearly taught in the Scriptures (cf. 2Timothy 3:16). But the method in which inspiration is done through the Holy Spirit is not revealed to us by God. This knowledge is part of the secret that belongs only to God. Having said that, imprecatory psalms are cries from the psalmists to the LORD for divine justice upon God's enemies or believers' enemies who try to thwart or hinder the work of God. They were not imprecations made out of a vengeful heart but out of a desire to see God's glory and His justice prevail.

IV. EXAMINING IMPRECATORY PSALMS

There are basically four kinds of imprecatory psalms. These categories are decided based upon the context of these psalms. They were uttered: because the person doing God's will was persecuted ("personal" – Psalms 5, 7, 59, 69, 109); for the justice of God against the wicked (Psalm 58); for the honour of God (Psalm 139); and for God's justice against wicked nations (Psalms 83, 137). The common theme is of crying for justice. The psalmists have not committed any sin to deserve the persecution and great injustices done to them. They cried to the LORD for deliverance and for these wicked persecutors to be dealt with according to their wicked deeds. We shall examine two of these imprecatory Psalms to see if we can make imprecatory prayers before the LORD.

A. Psalm 69 (against persons) – The depth of the unjust persecution that David experienced is vividly captured by his own words. David testified (Psalm 69:1-4) –

- V. 1 -- Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto *my* soul.
- V. 2 -- I sink in deep mire, where *there is* no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.
- V. 3 -- I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God.
- V. 4 -- They that hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of mine head: they that would destroy me, *being* mine enemies wrongfully, are mighty: then I restored *that* which I took not away. – *David asked God to check his life. David was certain that what he went through at this time was due to injustice in his life. He had not done anything wrong!*

NOTE: – From this we learn that imprecatory psalms or prayers were not meant for

²⁹James Oliver Buswell, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 184. Adams does say that "this does not do away with David and the other authors of these psalms but gives fulfillment to their prayers (p. 35)". The manner in which these psalms, which are supposed to be the prayers of Christ, is fulfilled is not explained. Will they be fulfilled as prophecies? If so, then the imprecatory psalms are prophetic statements which can be said by the human authors without any ethical problems and Adams does not have to say that Christ prayed them.

one to curse out of revenge or from a vengeful heart. The believer must first examine his heart before any form of imprecation ought to be made.

David did boldly claim that he was persecuted because of the will of God in his life (Psalm 69:7-11): -

- V. 7 -- Because for thy sake I have borne reproach; shame hath covered my face. – *David states clearly that what he went through was due to the LORD's will for him. The will of the LORD in David's life has to refer to his appointment as the next king of Israel. His persecutors had to be King Saul and his soldiers and all Israel. The next verse below affirms this interpretation as David was also hated by his own people and had to hide in Philistine territory in order to find safety.*
- V. 8 -- I am become a stranger unto my brethren, and an alien unto my mother's children.
- V. 9 -- For the zeal of thine house hath eaten me up; and the reproaches of them that reproached thee are fallen upon me. – *When David experienced persecution for the cause of Christ, he says here that these were "reproaches of them that reproached thee." The "thee" here refers to the LORD.*
- V. 10 -- When I wept, *and chastened* my soul with fasting, that was to my reproach.
- V. 11 -- I made sackcloth also my garment; and I became a proverb to them.

NOTE: -- From this we learn that David was persecuted because of the accomplishing of the will of God in his life. David said that when he was reproached it was as if the LORD was being reproached. David was bearing on his body the reproaches of Christ. This is similar to what the apostle Paul taught in Colossians 1:24 (KJV), "Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church:" Also, when the LORD met Saul on the road to Damascus He asked Saul, "why persecutest thou me?"! (cf. Acts 9:4-5).

David prayed for the LORD's punishment to be upon his and the LORD's enemies! David wanted God's will to be accomplished in his life. But the enemies wanted to thwart God's will in David's life which was as good as fighting against God Himself. David wanted them punished for their sins. If they had succeeded, salvation for mankind would have been lost. David's imprecatory prayer included (cf. Psalm 69:22-29):--

- V. 22 -- Let their table become a snare before them: and *that which should have been for their welfare, let it become* a trap. – let the food on their table become a trap;
- V. 23 -- Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not; and make their loins continually to shake. – let their eyes become blind;
- V. 24 -- Pour out thine indignation upon them, and let thy wrathful anger take hold of them. – let the anger of the LORD deal with them severely;
- V. 25 -- Let their habitation be desolate; *and* let none dwell in their tents. – let their homes be emptied of all human beings;
- V. 26 -- For they persecute *him* whom thou hast smitten; and they talk to the grief of those whom thou hast wounded.
- V. 27 -- Add iniquity unto their iniquity: and let them not come into thy

righteousness. – let their sins compound one on top of another and not be forgiven and let them increase and do not forgive them;

- V. 28 -- Let them be blotted out of the book of the living, and not be written with the righteous. – let them die in their sins and not be given salvation;
- V. 29 -- But I *am* poor and sorrowful: let thy salvation, O God, set me up on high.

NOTE – David’s imprecatory prayer was for a total and complete destruction of the LORD’s enemies and for it to be without redemption. It was as if David knew that these were men whom God had not elected unto salvation. On closer examination of the psalm, we see that this was not the case. David was cast out of Israel by King Saul and his men. This was as good as asking David to stop believing in the LORD. The manner in which David was persecuted implied that David was driven to the point of ceasing to believe in the LORD. Thank God that David refused to succumb to their pressure. He held on to his faith and trusted in the LORD despite the adverse inhumane treatment he received from his mortal enemies! David was crying for justice, i.e. equal treatment; the law of *lex talionis*. This was an imprecation and not a prophecy! The conclusion of this psalm pans out this understanding of David’s imprecatory prayer. He was not vindictive. He prayed for the LORD’s justice to come for the salvation of Israel. See Psalm 69:30-36 (KJV) below: --

- V. 30 -- I will praise the name of God with a song, and will magnify him with thanksgiving.
- V. 31 -- *This* also shall please the LORD better than an ox *or* bullock that hath horns and hoofs.
- V. 32 -- The humble shall see *this, and* be glad: and your heart shall live that seek God.
- V. 33 -- For the LORD heareth the poor, and despiseth not his prisoners.
- V. 34 -- Let the heaven and earth praise him, the seas, and everything that moveth therein.
- V. 35 -- For God will save Zion, and will build the cities of Judah: that they may dwell there, and have it in possession.
- V. 36 -- The seed also of his servants shall inherit it: and they that love his name shall dwell therein.

It was all about Zion, the city of the living God. This was a spiritual warfare that David was obviously very much aware of. He understood that it was not personal. If King Saul had succeeded in killing David, salvation plan for all mankind would have been jeopardized. Furthermore, David also understood that repentance and salvation is of the LORD and not man. In other words, if a sinner repents of his sin and turns back to the LORD, it is not the work of sinful man but it is entirely the work of God.

B. Psalm 137 (against nations) – This is a national psalm of mourning and imprecation by a nation. The use of the plural first personal pronoun from verses 1 to 4 supports this understanding. It is true that from verses 5 to 6 the plural changed to singular and then in verse 8 it is back to plural again. This means that the psalmist wrote on behalf of the nation and then he gave his own feelings on the matter of the imprecation. The context is the exile of Judah in the land of the Babylonians. The psalm begins with the location of the rivers of

Babylon. The captives sat there weeping as they remembered Zion. Zion had taken on enormous spiritual significance because of Solomon's prayer when he dedicated the Temple to the LORD. He prayed and the LORD accepted his prayer that whenever anyone who sincerely prays toward this city where the Temple was located, the LORD would hear his prayers. The city of Zion was known as the dwelling place of the LORD. The destruction of the city and the Temple implied "ichabod"!

The city was now in ruins after the captivity. We cannot be certain which captivity it was for there were three captivities in total. The first was in 605 B.C. when Daniel and his three friends and others were taken to Babylon to be reprogrammed to become loyal servants of the King of Babylon. The second was in 597 B.C. when Ezekiel, together with thousands of Jews were taken into captivity. The third and final was the complete destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple which occurred in 586 B.C. The sad state of spiritual Israel and the manner in which she was devastated gave rise to this imprecatory psalm. **Psalm 137:1-6 (KJV): --**

- **V. 1** -- By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. – *Zion means "guiding pillar or sign"*.
- **V. 2** -- We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.
- **V. 3** -- For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. – *These Jewish captives were mocked by their captors. They were asked to sing one of the songs of Zion in Babylon! The humiliation was unbearable for a people once so mighty and strong.*
- **V. 4** -- How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?
- **V. 5** -- If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget *her cunning*. -- *Jerusalem means "founded peaceful."*
- **V. 6** -- If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.

NOTE: -- The captured Jews would never forget Zion or Jerusalem. It is their home. It represents the presence of the LORD in the midst of Israel. They must never forget Jerusalem. But to sing songs of Jerusalem to entertain these Babylonians was most insulting especially when the city was either in ruins or destroyed. No matter what, they would cry to the LORD that they would always remember Jerusalem, which means that they would always remember the LORD. They were in a sad state of captivity but they knew that the LORD was still with them; for many of the captured Jews were godly men like Daniel and Ezekiel.

The imprecation came out of this sad state of insult and abject humiliation by an enemy that God used to punish Israel for her repeated idolatrous life. However, the brutality of the Babylonians against the Jews was the point of the imprecatory psalm. It was one thing to punish but another to brutalize. **Psalm 137:7-9 (KJV): --**

- **V. 7** -- Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, *Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.* – *Edom was located in the Southern tip of the Dead Sea. This was the back door of the Jews who lived in Jerusalem if they wanted to flee for their lives. Instead of pitying their fellow relatives (due to Esau and*

Jacob who were twin sons of Isaac), Edom cheered the Babylonians on as they burned and destroyed and humiliated the Jews. The Edomites cheered and goaded the Babylonians to continue and increase their brutality against the Jews.

- **V. 8** -- O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. – *The cry of the psalmist on behalf of his people was that the Babylonians receive their just reward for what they did to the Jews. It was a cry for lex talionis! Justice was the clarion call in this imprecatory psalm.*
- **V. 9** -- Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones. – *Apparently when the Babylonians attacked and destroyed Jerusalem, they took the Jewish babies and toddlers and dashed them to pieces against the stone, i.e. craggy rock. Such brutality against defenceless babies and toddlers struck a painful and nightmarish chord in the heart of every Jew. How can one ever forget such a horrendous sight?! The psalmist, on behalf of the people of Israel, cried to the LORD for justice, that just as they did this to us, may God also do the same to them!*

NOTE – The imprecatory cry was to the LORD for justice. The Jews were not crying for over punishment, neither did they ask for a lighter punishment. It was definitely not personal vengeance that the psalmist sought. They simply asked the LORD, who is the just and righteous God, for justice to be meted out to both the Edomites and the Babylonians for what they did to them. Such a cry of justice ought to be in the lips of God’s people today. For there are no people on earth blessed with a better sense of right and wrong than the people of God because they have the perfect Bible to guide and help them in deciding what justice and injustices are.

V. IMPRECATORY PSALMS AND NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

A. Love instead of curse – Jesus taught these words in His sermon on the mount to all believers. He says in **Matthew 5:43-46** (KJV), "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. **44** But I say unto you, Love your enemies, blesthem that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; **45** That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. **46** For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same?"

NOTE – the context of what Christ taught here is one of personal injury. The Jews had misapplied the Word of God - what was meant for the law courts to regulate justice in the judicial realm, the Jews with their traditions had applied them to personal injury. Christ was putting right a wrong application of a wonderful truth which God gave to Moses. This truth simply means that imprecatory prayers cannot be used for those who abuse or take advantage of Christians in a sin sick world. These words of Christ are not teaching the believer to ignore the justice of God which is what the imprecatory psalms teach.

B. Love your brother – **1 John 4:19-21** (KJV), "We love him, because he first

loved us. **20** If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? **21** And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also.”

NOTE -- This passage of the Bible teaches us to love our brother and not to hate him. This passage teaches the believer not to bear hatred and guile toward a brother without a just cause. We have to bear in mind that hatred is a God given emotion that is part of our make-up from the time of creation. It is an emotion that God Himself has. Therefore when God made us in His image, we have this emotion called hatred. The problem is that like anger, the emotion of hatred has been misapplied. We love what we are not supposed to love. We hate what we are not supposed to hate. As believers we must learn to love and hate like God. The above passage teaches us to love and hate properly. If a "brother" attacks the Word of God and deceives many by preaching another gospel thus leading them to Hell, the Bible teaches us to hate such people.

Psalm 139:20-24 (KJV), "For they speak against thee wickedly, *and* thine enemies take *thy name* in vain. **21** Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? **22** I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them mine enemies. **23** Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: **24** And see if *there be any* wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

John taught the same truth in 2 John 1:7-11 (KJV), "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. . . . **9** Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. **10** If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into *your* house, neither bid him God speed: **11** For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds."

This means that when an imprecatory psalm is uttered, it is not based upon hatred without a just cause. The just cause is found in Holy Scriptures, an example would be attacking the testimony of Christ by preaching a false gospel and attacking the perfect Word of God. Paul brought an anathema upon such individuals. Is this not a NT imprecation? The seriousness of such a destructive act prompted the gentle and loving apostle Paul to invoke the anathema twice within the same passage. He said –

Galatians 1:6-9 (KJV), "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: **7** Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. **8** But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. **9** As we said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed." [emphasis added]

C. Don't Pray for this sin – If imprecatory prayer is wrong, then how does one understand verses like 1 John 5:14-17 (KJV), "And this is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he heareth us: **15** And if we know that

he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him. **16** If any man see his brother sin a sin *which is* not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. **17** All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death." [emphasis added]

NOTE – There are three kinds of death taught in Scriptures. There is physical death, spiritual death and the second death. If a person is dying physically, we can pray for such a person. David prayed for his baby who was about to experience physical death. We can also pray for those who are in spiritual death. We pray for the LORD to save them from their sins which is evidence of spiritual death. Then there is the third kind of death, the Second Death. What is the sin that leads to this second death that we are told not to pray for? It has to be the sin of attacking the person of Christ and His holy and perfect Word especially after having tasted His goodness and then rejecting Him. For such a one the Bible warns there is no repentance and salvation!

Hebrews 6:4-6 (KJV), "For *it is* impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, **5** And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, **6** If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put *him* to an open shame."

CONCLUSION – The OT is different from the NT in terms of their witness. The former is one of national witness whereas the latter is an ecclesiastical witness. Both lived in a period of God's grace. This has not changed. In this age of grace, the psalmist, inspired by the Holy Spirit, penned these imprecations to teach all of us the importance of looking at sin itself and that we will not commit such heinous sins that would deceive sinners, making them think that they will be going to heaven. Such deception and delusion are deadly serious to the LORD. These imprecatory psalms plead before God for divine justice (cf. the Lord's Prayer). Believers must understand that they have the best sense of justice because they have the Word of God to guide them. How can they allow the sin of attacking God and His Word to go unpunished! It is God's Name that saves. To attack the only Name under heaven that can save sinners is a very serious offence in the sight of God. Believers today need to have such a high view of God and His perfect and holy Word in order to defend and fight the good fight of faith! Praying imprecatory prayers is part of the spiritual battle for all ages.

The NT is not devoid of curses and warnings to all those who attack the Word of God and undermine the gospel by preaching false gospels. These are evil men who lead and have led many to Hell by their deception. The apostle Paul cursed anyone who did this! We are not to pray for these men who commit sins that result in eternal death! Imagine a false preacher who deliberately teaches a false gospel for filthy lucre. He has led hundreds if not thousands to Hell by preaching a false gospel but if he repents, he would go to heaven. What about all those who went to Hell because of his deliberate falsehood? Such a sinner has committed the sin unto death! Let us not forget that the LORD can still harden hearts today just as He did to Pharaoh in the days of the exodus.

The world would be like Sodom and Gomorrah before the Lord's return. Sins of great proportion

like fornication and homosexuality would abound all over the world. By all means pray for these sinners. The Bible teaches that we are to pray for them and definitely to not pray imprecatory prayers against these poor sinners. However, there are the preachers, teachers and seminary and Bible College professors who know the truth but deliberately deceive and lead many to hell. These are the ones who must be prayed against, that the LORD will judge them for their unspeakable and heinous sin of deception. The Bible warns:--

2 Thessalonians 2:9-12 (KJV), "Even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, 10 And with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish; because they received not the love of the truth, that they might be saved. **11** And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: 12 That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness." [Emphasis added]

Today, there are many of such people described in 2 Thessalonians 2:9-12.

When imprecatory prayers are forbidden –

- His persecution is personal -- The Christian must realize that when he is persecuted because of his testimony for Christ, it is personal. The persecutor is not attacking the will or work of Christ per se. The believer must turn the other cheek and go the second mile. The believer is even told by our Lord to pray for them who despitefully use believers.
- He is angry and wants revenge – Personal vengeance is not the basis for imprecatory prayers. His only son was killed at a zebra crossing by a drunken driver. The driver is not even remorseful and refuses to apologize. The court sentenced him to one year in jail but he could be out earlier for good behaviour. The Christian cannot pray an imprecatory prayer.
- He has been hurt or wounded deeply – He has just been cheated of his savings from 40 years of hard work by a “travel agent”. His plan for a round the world trip with his wife has fallen to pieces. The Christian is not allowed to curse and wish ill on that person.

When imprecatory prayers are permitted – Believers can pray like the psalmists in all the 150 psalms, which would include the imprecatory psalms as well. This may not be agreeable to many believers’ general make-up. They may find it difficult to pray such imprecations; but when they are able to see from God's perspective, they will realize that these imprecatory prayers are right and that these prayers reflect the LORD's view of sin and sinners who hinder the work of the LORD to save souls.

This approach asserts that the Christian can pray the imprecatory Psalms as his own provided he prays as follows: --

- Not for his own personal advancement or victory over his private enemies but for "the advancement of God's Kingdom - that God's enemies be destroyed";³⁰
- In accordance with God's revealed will "based on God's prophetic Word of `everlasting

³⁰ James E. Adams, **War Psalms of the Prince of Peace**, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1991), 56.

- destruction";³¹
- For conversion as the goal since "God consistently leads men to Himself through judgment."³²
 - For the glory of God; and
 - For God's justice to prevail on earth.

³¹Ibid., 59.

³²Ibid., 59-60.