

Psalms: Understanding the Imprecatory Psalms

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke examines the theological and ethical challenges surrounding the Imprecatory Psalms, where psalmists petition God to avenge wrongs and judge their enemies. After evaluating and rejecting common inadequate solutions—such as reinterpreting the prayers as mere future prophecies or dismissing them as morally flawed—Waltke grounds these psalms within Old Testament holy war theology, divine justice, and covenantal faith. He distinguishes between the role of the state, which wields the sword to enforce temporal justice, and the church, which is called under the Sermon on the Mount to pray for enemies and extend grace during the present age of God's favor. Ultimately, Waltke concludes that while imprecatory prayers are doctrinally sound and reflect a holy zeal for justice, they are practically inappropriate for direct Christian liturgical usage today as personal judgment is reserved for God's final end-time resolution.

Outline

I. Introduction and Structural Review of Petition Psalms

A. Opening Prayer and Contextual Orientation

1. Thanksgiving for church fathers, historic teachers, and spiritual heritage
2. Prayer for spiritual discrimination, wisdom, and grace in studying Scripture

B. Review of Form-Critical Approaches to the Psalter

1. Praise and Thanksgiving Psalms (e.g., Psalm 92)
2. Petition and Lament Psalms as the dominant genre in the Psalter
 - a. Normalcy of lament throughout the believer's spiritual maturation
 - b. Function of lament in demonstrating God's triumph over sin, death, and evil
3. Situational contexts of the Psalmist
 - a. Temple setting vs. separation from the sanctuary
 - b. Identification of the enemy as a moral and spiritual adversary of God's kingdom
 - c. Refutation of Hermann Gunkel's psychological/sickness interpretation of the enemy
4. Structural motifs within Petition Psalms
 - a. Address to God (turning exclusively to God in distress as an act of faith)
 - b. Lament and core petitions for deliverance and juridical vindication

- c. Oscillations between protestations of innocence and penitential confession
- d. Declarations of confidence grounded in God's character and salvation history

II. Definition and Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms

A. Definition and Scope of Imprecatory Psalms

- 1. Quantitative scope: Approximately 35 out of 50 petition psalms include prayers for punishment of enemies
- 2. Proper definition: Petitions asking God to avenge wrongs and enact divine justice (avenging vs. personal revenge)

B. The Ethical and Hermeneutical Dilemma

- 1. Tension between Old Testament imprecations and New Testament Christian ethics
 - a. Ethics of the Sermon on the Mount (turning the other cheek, loving enemies, praying for persecutors)
 - b. Example of Christ on the Cross and Stephen praying for forgiveness of executioners
- 2. The Critical Distinction Between Church and State
 - a. Role of the State: Wielding the sword to punish evil and uphold justice (Romans 12–13)
 - b. Role of the Church: Cross-bearing, love, and praying for the enemy's salvation
 - c. Old Testament context: Israel as a theocratic state where kingdom and state were coextensive

III. Evaluation and Refutation of Inadequate Solutions

A. Solution 1: Reinterpreting Prayers as Future Prophecies

- 1. Argument: Reading Hebrew verbs as future indicatives ('they will be punished') rather than jussives ('may they be punished')
- 2. Refutation: Clear grammatical jussives exist in Hebrew; translators correctly render them as genuine petitions

B. Solution 2: Rejecting the Imprecations as Uninspired, Sub-Christian, or Unsanctified

- 1. Radical liberal positions: Attributing psalms to mean-spiritedness (Rudolf Kittel) or calling them 'devilish' (C. S. Lewis on Ps 137)
- 2. Moderate compromise positions: Viewing David in spiritual 'twilight' (Beardsley), estranged from the Spirit (John Bright), or partially sanctified (Albert Barnes)
- 3. Fourfold refutation of rejecting the text:
 - a. Undermines the doctrine of divine inspiration without biblical warrant for censorship
 - b. Ignores the Old Testament Holy War motif and prophetic traditions
 - c. Contradicts New Testament apostolic approval (e.g., Peter citing imprecatory psalms regarding Judas in Acts 1:20)
 - d. Overlooks heavenly imprecations in the New Testament (e.g., martyrs under the altar in Revelation 6:9–10)

C. Solution 3: Direct Application for Personal Vengeance Today

- 1. Example: Contemporary prayers calling for immediate physical destruction of political/personal foes (e.g., Bob Jones, 1982)

2. Refutation: Directly contradicts Christ's teaching and apostolic practice for the Church age

IV. Toward a Solution: Theological Character of Imprecatory Psalms

A. Sympathy with the Historical Context of Suffering

1. Authors faced unprovoked, brutal aggression and gross moral/economic exploitation
2. Contrast between comfortable modern academic critique and the agony of real persecution

B. High View of Divine Justice and Moral Indignation

1. Petitions appeal to the God of justice when civil courts fail or corrupt authorities abuse power
2. C. S. Lewis's observation: Jewish imprecations reflect superior moral seriousness compared to pagan literature
3. Moral indignation as a necessary symptom of believing in absolute moral standards
4. Alignment with New Testament affirmations of God's coming vindication and justice (Luke 18; Matthew 7:23)

C. Expressions of Covenant Faith and Non-Self-Vengeance

1. Entrusting retribution entirely to God rather than taking personal revenge (e.g., David sparing Saul)
2. Biblical condemnation of self-avengers (e.g., Lamech in Genesis 4)

D. Ethical, Theocratic, Theocentric, and Covenantal Dimensions

1. Ethical: Sharp distinction between righteousness and wickedness
2. Theocratic: Petitioning the Sovereign Administrator of the universe to uphold covenant law
3. Theocentric: Aiming for God's name, righteousness, and glory to be exalted universally
4. Evangelistic: Demonstrating God's ultimate supreme authority over all nations
5. Covenantal: Recognizing that assaults on God's people are direct attacks on God Himself

E. Conditional Nature of Imprecatory Maledictions

1. Oriental poetic imagery and hyperbole in ancient Near Eastern literary style
2. Prophetic principle (Jeremiah 18): All divine pronouncements of judgment are conditional upon lack of repentance
3. Biblical illustrations of mercy upon repentance (Rahab saved vs. Achan judged)

V. Synthesis and Application for the Contemporary Church

A. Doctrinal Validity vs. Practical Inapplicability

1. Imprecatory Psalms conform strictly to sound doctrine within their Old Testament covenantal framework
2. In the present Church age, divine judgment is postponed until the Final Judgment
3. Exegetical proof from Luke 4:18–20: Jesus stopped quoting Isaiah 61:1–2 before 'the day of vengeance of our God'
4. The present era is specifically designated as 'the year of the Lord's favor' and grace

B. Dual Citizenship Responsibilities of the Christian

1. As members of the Church: Exercise cross-bearing, pray for enemy salvation, extend forgiveness

2. As citizens of the State: Support civil government in wielding the sword to suppress evil and protect the innocent (e.g., combatting modern atrocities like ISIS)

VI. Exegetical Case Study: Psalm 137

A. Literary Context and Structure

1. Historical setting: Exile by the rivers of Babylon and grief over Zion's destruction
2. Refusal to sing sacred songs for captors as a refusal to desecrate holy things

B. Analysis of the Threefold Maledictions

1. Imprecation against self: Loss of musical skill and speech if Jerusalem is forgotten
2. Imprecation against Edom: Judgment for gloating over Jerusalem's fall
3. Imprecation against Babylon: Recompense according to strict justice

C. Hermeneutical Resolution of Harsh Imagery ('Dashing Infants')

1. Expression of zeal for God's kingdom and the sanctuary as the locus of earthly salvation
2. Strict justice according to ancient Oriental warfare practices inflicted by Babylon
3. Conditional nature: Maledictions remain subject to divine mercy should enemies repent