

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Session 13, Imprecatory Psalms 20-min. Podcast Audio Overview

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

All right. Strap in, everybody. Today, we are going deep on some, well, some pretty tough stuff.

The imprecatory Psalms, the ones where the writer's asking God to lay down the law, bring the hammer down, justice, maybe even some punishment on their enemies. I've got to say, these are the parts of the Bible that always, always kind of leave me scratching my head. Yeah.

I mean, it's a natural reaction. They can feel pretty jarring, especially when you think about stuff like the Sermon on the Mount, right? Yeah. Love your enemies.

Turn the other cheek. All that. Exactly.

I mean, how do you go from, like, bless those who persecute you to dash their children against the rocks? Right. Like, whoa, that line from Psalm 137 about the Babylonians, intense, to say the least. Oh, yeah.

Super powerful image. Yeah. And disturbing, no doubt.

One that really sticks with you. And you're not alone. You're not alone in feeling unsettled by it.

You know, C.S. Lewis, who, as you know, I have immense respect for, even called Psalm 137 devilish. So, I mean, if somebody like Lewis wrestled with this stuff, it's definitely okay if it makes you uncomfortable. So how are we supposed to understand them? We can't just, like, ignore them.

They're right there in Scripture. Right. Thank goodness we've got Dr. Bruce Waltke to kind of help us navigate this tricky territory.

He's an expert in the Old Testament. And he's got this lecture where he offers a, I think, a really insightful way to understand these Psalms, both, you know, within their historical context, and he kind of unpacks the challenges they pose for us, like, today as Christians. Yeah.

One of the things I really appreciate about Waltke's approach is that he really tackles the problem head-on. Right. You know, he acknowledges that for most of us, you know, we probably agree that we want justice for ourselves.

Yeah. That's one thing. But calling for, you know, punishment on others from, like, God, it feels different.

Different. Yeah. And he also points out that, like, a lot of the common ways that people try to explain away these Psalms, they just don't, they don't hold up under scrutiny.

Like saying, oh, they're not really prayers; they're just prophecies of what God's going to do. Exactly. Or that, you know, they're just wrong.

Right. You know, primitive, unchristian, like, they reflect some less developed kind of spirituality or whatever. Right.

I've heard those arguments, but I've never been fully convinced. What's Waltke's take? Well, he argues that those interpretations just don't fit with the text itself. Okay.

Yeah. Or the overall, like, theological context of Scripture. Yeah.

So, for example, one of the most common arguments against these Psalms being prayers is that they use the future tense. Okay. Right.

Yeah. People will say, well, see, that means the psalmist is just predicting what God will do, not asking for it. Right.

But Waltke points out that the future tense is often used in Hebrew prayers. Oh, interesting. To express a strong desire, a request.

Okay. Not just a prediction. So the language itself doesn't necessarily rule out that these are real, genuine prayers.

Exactly. Okay. So if we accept that these are actual prayers, then where do we go from there? Right.

Yeah. Well, Waltke emphasizes this point before we jump to conclusions. We need to understand the world these psalmists lived in.

Okay. Yeah. You know, they weren't writing from some place of comfort and security.

Right. I'm going to remember. They were often facing what he calls gross injustices, situations where earthly justice had totally failed them.

I mean, I can only imagine how desperate you would have to feel to cry out to God for that kind of intervention. Oh, absolutely. One of Waltke's students, Rory Prest, said something that I think really drives this point home.

He said, few have experienced the agony of unprovoked naked aggression and gross exploitation. Wow. Right.

Yeah. Imagine living in a world where violence and oppression are just rampant, and there's literally no one to turn to but God. So these pleas for divine intervention, they're coming from a place of deep, deep suffering, a feeling of utter powerlessness, and ultimately a belief that God is the only one who can make things right.

Exactly. Exactly. And that's actually a key point because, you know, Waltke argues that these Psalms, as harsh as they sound, are actually profound expressions of faith.

Wait, really? How, how can asking for somebody's destruction be an expression of faith? I know it's, it's counterintuitive, right? Yeah. But the key is this, the Psalmists aren't taking revenge themselves. They're putting their trust in God to act justly.

Okay. Waltke really emphasizes this distinction. Yeah.

These are cries for justice, not just like anger-fueled rants. Okay. Yeah.

I see, I see the difference there. So it's about surrendering your desire for revenge to God, trusting that he'll ultimately handle things justly. Exactly.

And he, and he contrasts the Psalmists, you know, with the, uh, the wicked people in the Bible, like, like Lamech in Genesis, who boasts about killing a man, you know, taking revenge into his own hands. Yeah. I'll get you back 77-fold.

Right. Exactly. The Psalmists, though, despite their, you know, their strong emotions, are ultimately choosing to rely on God.

Yeah. Not their own strength or schemes. It's kind of like David's restraint with King Saul.

Right. I mean, Saul was literally hunting him down. Right.

Trying to kill him. Right. But David refused to harm him because he was God's anointed King.

Yeah. He trusted God to deal with it, even when it meant enduring just incredible suffering. That's a great example.

And, uh, it connects to an interesting observation that, uh, C.S. Lewis made. Okay. About the lack of moral outrage, actually, in pagan literature.

Oh. He suggested that the ancient Jews, they, they took right and wrong more seriously than their neighbors. Which, if you think about it, kind of makes those imprecatory Psalms all the more, uh, striking.

Right. They weren't just like casually wishing harm on their enemies. They were deeply outraged by injustice.

Because they believed in a God who cared deeply about right and wrong. Makes you wonder, huh, like, do we lack that kind of fierce moral outrage today? Because our sense of right and wrong has become maybe a bit blurry. Hmm.

Good question. And it leads to another big one. Yeah.

How do these Psalms fit with the New Testament? I mean, the New Testament focuses so much on love and forgiveness. Does that mean like God's justice just disappears? That's a big one. Yeah.

Yeah. And that's, that's where we'll, uh, pick up in the next part of our deep dive. Okay.

Because Waltke makes it clear, the New Testament, even with its focus on love and forgiveness, absolutely does not erase the concept of God's justice. All right. Good.

Looking forward to it. So we're left with this question. How does God's justice, uh, fit into the New Testament? Yeah.

It's a huge topic. And I'm really curious to hear, you know, what Waltke has to say about it. Yeah.

No, it's a complex issue for sure. But, uh, I think Waltke does a really good job of connecting the dots. He points out that even though the New Testament really emphasizes, you know, love, forgiveness, it doesn't, it doesn't shy away from God's justice at all.

Right. I mean, there are plenty of examples, uh, like, you know, Jesus's parable of the persistent widow. Okay.

And the unjust judge, the takeaway there, God will bring justice for those who cry out to him. That parable always struck me as like such a, such a powerful statement about God's commitment to justice. Yeah.

Even if it sometimes feels like it's delayed from our perspective. Yeah. You know, it definitely challenges our assumptions about, uh, about how God acts and when.

Yeah. And then, and then you have those, uh, those sobering words from Jesus about final judgment, eternal punishment. Right.

He didn't erase the concept of divine judgment, but, as Waltke puts it, he shifted the timeline. Okay. Okay.

So, we're dealing with this tension right between God's justice and his mercy. How, how do those two seemingly opposite ideas coexist? Yeah. That's where things get really interesting.

Okay. Waltke uses this, um, this fascinating comparison actually to kind of illuminate this tension. He looks at how Isaiah and Jesus used the same prophecy from Isaiah 61.

Okay. In Isaiah, you know, we read about the year of the Lord's favor, but also the, uh, day of vengeance. Right.

But, but when Jesus reads this passage in Luke, he deliberately stops before getting to the day of vengeance part. Whoa. Wow.

I, I never, I never noticed that before. It's true. Why, why would Jesus do that? Well, it's, it's brilliant, I think.

Yeah. Waltke points out that by stopping where he did, Jesus highlighted a key distinction between his ministry and what was to come. Okay.

Right. Yeah. His focus was on grace, salvation in the present, not enacting judgment at that time.

Okay. He left the day of vengeance for the future. So essentially Jesus hit the pause button on the judgment part.

But it's still there, like waiting in the wings, so to speak. It's like those two sides of God's character, justice and mercy, they're operating on different timelines. I like that.

Yeah. And I think that's a crucial insight for understanding how these in purgatory Psalms fit into the bigger picture. Yeah.

Waltke argues that while they reflect a valid understanding of God's justice within their historical and theological context, they're not a model for how Christians should pray today. Okay. So we're not, you know, supposed to be praying for our enemies to be, like, you know, struck down by lightning or whatever.

But I'm still kind of struggling, honestly, with Psalm 137. The one with the, the, uh. The intense imagery.

The intense imagery, yeah. About the Babylonian babies. Yeah.

Yeah. How do we, how do we reconcile that with what we know about God's character? That's a tough one. No doubt.

Yeah. Waltke spends quite a bit of time actually unpacking that particular Psalm. He points out that it's a communal lament, you know, the people of Israel are pouring out their grief and anguish over the destruction of Jerusalem.

Right. They're exiled to Babylon. It's important to see those imprecations within that context.

Yes. Of intense suffering, trauma. Absolutely.

So their words are raw, you know, fueled by pain and loss. Yeah. But still, that, that line about the babies, uh, I mean, it's hard to stomach.

It is. And Waltke doesn't shy away from that difficulty. Yeah.

Uh, he reminds us that ancient warfare, especially in the ancient Near East, was incredibly brutal. Yeah. I mean, the destruction of a site often involved just horrific acts of violence against women and children.

So the Psalmists are using the language of their time, the language of war and conquest, to express their desire for justice to be served. It's still tough to hear, though, especially, you know, for us today. Absolutely.

But, but Waltke also highlights a point that I think often gets missed. The, the concept of, um, of strict justice in the Old Testament actually had exceptions. Oh, interesting.

God's judgment was never meant to be like a mindless mechanical process. Right. Right.

We see that throughout the Old Testament. Yeah. Like, like with Rahab.

Rahab, yeah. The prostitute in the book of Joshua. Right.

She helped the Israelite spies. Yeah. And because of her faith, she was spared even though she was a Canaanite.

Right. According to the rules of holy war, she should have been, you know, killed along with the other Canaanites. Yeah.

But God saw her heart. Yeah. Her willingness to turn towards him and his mercy prevailed.

Wow. Her story is a powerful reminder that God's judgment always involves looking beyond outward labels and seeing the individual. And on the flip side, you have the story of Ekan.

Ekan. Yeah. An Israelite who disobeyed God's commands, uh, during the conquest of Jericho.

Right. He took some of the plunder that was supposed to be destroyed and, as a result, brought judgment on himself and his family. Yeah.

Even though he was one of God's chosen people, you know, his actions had consequences. His actions had consequences. Yeah.

These stories, I think they, they highlight a crucial principle. God's judgment isn't about ethnicity or national identity. It's about righteousness and faithfulness.

Right. And Waltke suggests that the same principle applies to the imprecatory Psalms. Yes.

So are you saying that, if any of the Babylonians had, you know, repented, if they had, like, turned to God and acknowledged the wrong they had done, then God's judgment wouldn't have applied to them? That's exactly what he's suggesting. It's a conditional curse, not a blanket condemnation.

Exactly. Remember these Psalms; they're ultimately about the establishment of God's kingdom, a kingdom of justice and righteousness. And that, that brings us back to the Lord's prayer, doesn't it? Yeah.

When we pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done. Are we, are we aligning ourselves with those imprecatory Psalms and praying for God's kingdom to come, you know, with a sword? That's a great question. And it gets to the heart of the difference, I think, between the Old and New Testaments.

Waltke draws a clear distinction between the theocratic state of Israel, where God's people were also a political entity, and the church, which is a spiritual body. Wait, can you, can you explain that a bit more? What, what exactly does he mean by a theocratic state? Sure. Yeah.

He's, he's referring to the fact that in, in ancient Israel, there wasn't this, uh, separation between religious and political authority. God was seen as the ultimate king, right? And his laws governed every aspect of life, including, you know, civil and criminal justice. So when the Psalmists were praying for God's judgment, they were essentially praying for the

divinely appointed king to act, you know, on behalf of his people and to establish justice in the land.

So they weren't just expressing, like, personal anger or vengeance, but also a desire for God to uphold his covenant and bring order to a chaotic world. Exactly. But in the New Testament, things shift, uh, things shift pretty dramatically with the coming of Jesus.

Yeah. The establishment of the church. God's people are no longer defined by their political boundaries.

Right. Or ethnicity. The church is a spiritual kingdom made up of people from every tribe and nation.

Right. Yeah. And as members of this new kingdom, we're not called to establish, uh, an earthly reign through, you know, force.

Yeah. Our weapons are prayer, grace, and the, uh, the transformative power of the gospel. Even in situations, uh, like, you know, what's happening today with, uh, with ISIS and the persecution of Christians in the Middle East, our, our primary response as the church should be one of, of love, prayer, and, and a desire for our enemy's salvation.

Yeah. Even though, I mean, that can feel so difficult in the face of such horrific acts. You know? It's definitely a challenge to, to reconcile those two things, especially when we see, you know, such blatant evil and, and suffering.

It's, it's natural to feel anger, even, even outrage at injustice. But it sounds like what Walker is saying is that our motivation for seeking justice should always be, uh, rooted in love, not vengeance. Exactly.

He's not, he's not saying we shouldn't, you know, support just war or advocate for the protection of the innocent. Yeah. Those are, those are legitimate concerns.

Mm-hmm. But our ultimate goal as Christians should be reconciliation. Mm-hmm.

And the redemption of our enemies, not their destruction. Yeah. That's a, that's a high calling for sure.

Yeah. But, but what about those, those Christians who are in, in positions of, uh, political power, like, you know, president, who, who has to make decisions about, uh, about military intervention? Are they, are they acting as a, as a representative of, of the state or, or the church in those situations? Well, Waltke believes those roles should be kept distinct. A Christian in political office is ultimately responsible for upholding the laws and protecting the citizens of their country.

Right. But that doesn't mean they abandon their, uh, their Christian values. Oh, right.

It just means that they're, they're operating within the appropriate sphere of authority. So, so a Christian president might, might make a decision to go to war, uh, not out of a desire for vengeance. Right.

But, but out of a sense of duty to, to protect their nation and, and uphold justice, uh, on a, on a national level. Yeah. But at the same time, they can still pray for their enemies.

Yes. Hope for their conversion and work towards peace. Absolutely.

It's a, it's a, it's a complex balancing act for sure. Yeah. But I think it goes back to that point we made earlier about how the imprecatory Psalms actually reveal a very high view of justice.

Yeah. The Psalmists were so outraged by injustice because they believed in a God who cared deeply about right and wrong. Yeah.

That, that makes sense. Maybe, maybe the lesson we can take away for today isn't to, you know, start praying for God to, to smite enemies, but to, to cultivate that same sense of moral outrage when we see, uh, evil oppression, but instead of, you know, calling down fire from heaven, we, we channel that outrage into action, working for justice in a way that, that aligns with our Christian values. That's a powerful insight.

And it brings us to, I think, the heart of what Waltke is trying to convey ultimately: these imprecatory Psalms, even in their, uh, even in their seeming harshness, can, can teach us a lot about God ourselves and the, the complexity of, of living in a broken world. Yeah. They remind us that God is both just and merciful, and those two qualities aren't, uh, contradictory, but rather they work together in mysterious ways.

And that, and that while we can trust him to ultimately, you know, right every wrong, we're also called to be agents of his love and grace in the here and now. It's, it's like we have to, we have to hold these two truths in tension, you know, God's righteous anger towards evil. Yeah.

And, and at the same time, his, his boundless love and mercy for, for everyone, even, even those who've, uh, who've done terrible things. Yeah. It's, it's not always easy to wrap my head around that, to be honest.

It's a tension, uh, you know, that we see throughout Scripture, and it's one that we wrestle with in our own lives. Yeah, absolutely. How do we, how do we reconcile that desire for justice with the call to forgive? How do we balance our anger at injustice with the knowledge that God loves everyone, even those who seem unlovable? Yeah, it, it definitely isn't easy, but, but maybe that's the point, you know, maybe, maybe wrestling with these, these tough questions with truths that seem paradoxical. It forces us to engage with our faith on a deeper level.

I think so. Yeah. It pushes us to move beyond simplistic answers and embrace the complexity of God's character.

I think you're right. These ancient Psalms, even, even with their, uh, you know, rawness and intensity, they can, they can still challenge and convict us today. They force us to confront the reality of evil in the world and grapple with the vastness of God's character, which is far, far beyond our ability to fully, you know, comprehend.

And maybe, and maybe even in their harshness, they, uh, they offer us a glimpse of hope because ultimately those psalmist cries for justice. They, they point to their unwavering belief that God is in control, that he sees the suffering of his people and will ultimately, ultimately make things right. That's a message that resonates, uh, you know, across time and cultures; I think it speaks to that deep longing within us for a world where justice prevails, where evil is vanquished, and where, uh, where God's love reigns supreme.

So after the deep dive, how do you, how do you feel about the imprecatory psalms now? What, what resonates with you the most? You know, for me, it's the, it's the depth of the, uh, psalmist's faith that stands out, even in the midst of, of like unimaginable suffering; they, they never lost sight of, of, of God's goodness or, or his power to act. Yeah. They clung to that belief that he would ultimately vindicate them and establish his righteous reign.

Even when, even when everything around them seemed to contradict that belief. That's a powerful image. Maybe, maybe that's the challenge for us today.

Yeah. To cultivate that same kind of unwavering faith. Even, even when we're surrounded by, uh, you know, the, the darkness and brokenness of our world, to trust that God sees, God cares, and God will act.

Yeah. Even if his timing doesn't always, uh, align with our, you know, human desires. These, uh, these ancient psalms, they, they have so much to teach us.

About ourselves, about God and about this, this complex world we inhabit. They invite us to wrestle with difficult questions, grapple with uncomfortable truths, and deepen our understanding of both God's justice and his mercy. And maybe, you know, through that wrestling, we'll, we'll find ourselves drawn closer to, to the heart of God, a heart that, uh, that beats with both righteous anger towards evil and D, infinite compassion for, for all his children.

I think you've given us all a lot to ponder. Yeah. Thanks.

Uh, thanks for taking this deep dive with me. It's been great. And thanks to you for listening. Until next time.

Keep exploring, keep questioning, and keep seeking truth wherever it may lead.