

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Imprecatory Psalms,

Session 13, 6-min. Video Overview

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Ok, so we're about to dive into one of the most, let's be honest, uncomfortable parts of the Bible. We're talking about the Psalms that call for some pretty harsh stuff, like violence and destruction. How in the world are we supposed to make sense of them? Well, let's dig in.

Blessed is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks. Wow. Just let that sink in for a second.

Where do you think a line like that comes from? Some ancient, brutal war epic, maybe? What if I told you it's from the book of Psalms in the Bible? Yeah. So you've got to ask, right? This raises a massive question that has puzzled believers and critics for centuries. How can words like these exist in the same holy book that also tells people to love their enemies? It feels like a huge contradiction, and that's the puzzle we're going to try and solve today.

Now, there's a fancy name for these. Scholars call them the imprecatory Psalms. Imprecatory is basically a formal way of saying cursing.

These are actual prayers, asking God to punish an enemy and bring about justice. And get this, they aren't some rare, one-off thing. About a fifth of all the Psalms have this kind of language in them.

So let's just put this contradiction right out there on the table. So on one side, you have these Psalms that are literally praying for God to destroy an enemy. And on the other, you have what's maybe the cornerstone of Jesus's teaching.

Love your enemy and pray for them that persecute you. It's a real head-scratcher. And for Old Testament scholar Dr. Bruce Waltke, whose work we're looking at, this wasn't just an interesting puzzle.

It was a problem that really demanded a solid solution. So before getting to his own answer, Dr. Waltke first wades through some of the most common explanations people have come up with over the years. And well, he finds them all pretty unsatisfying.

Okay, so Dr. Waltke looks at the usual explanations and says, nope, not good enough. First, there's the idea that these aren't actually prayers. They're just prophecies of what's going to happen.

But Waltke points out that grammatically, they're clearly requests. The writer is asking God to do this. The second theory is that, you know what, these Psalms are just unholy and flat-out wrong.

And the third theory is the total opposite: that they're commands for Christians to actually use today. And that second theory, the one that says they're just plain wrong, was famously held by C.S. Lewis of all people. He even called these passages devilish.

That just shows you how deeply this problem has bothered even really brilliant thinkers. But Waltke argues that can't be right either because the New Testament itself actually quotes these very Psalms in a positive way, applying them to figures like Judas. So you can't just toss them out as uninspired.

So if all those common explanations just don't hold up, what does? This is where Dr. Waltke starts to build his own case. He gives us a framework, basically five keys, to help us understand what's really going on in these Psalms. Let's walk through these five keys.

First, they're righteous and just. This isn't about petty personal revenge like, "You stole my parking spot. It's an appeal to a just God to step in and fix a serious wrong.

Second, they're faithful. Instead of grabbing a sword and taking matters into their own hands, the psalmists are trusting God to be the judge. Third, they're theocentric, which is a fancy way of saying they're God-centered.

The worry isn't just for themselves; it's about God's reputation. They want the world to see that God's justice wins. Fourth, they're covenantal.

In their worldview, an attack on God's people was seen as a direct attack on God himself. And finally, number five, these curses are conditional. They're not absolute.

They kind of have an invisible if-they-don't-repent clause attached to them. You know, this idea of principled anger is really powerful. C.S. Lewis, the same guy who called them devilish, later pointed out something fascinating.

Ancient pagan stories are absolutely filled with violence, right? But what they have almost zero of is moral indignation. The psalmists' outrage comes from a deep, powerful belief that there is a real right and a real wrong. Their anger wasn't just personal; it was a reaction to injustice itself.

Okay, so with that entire framework in place, we can finally get to Dr. Waltke's solution. And the key isn't that one teaching is right and the other is wrong; it's that they belong to two totally different eras in the biblical story. The whole solution, according to Waltke, hinges on seeing this massive shift that happens between the Old and New Testaments.

The story of the Bible moves from an age where God's judgment was often immediate and physical to a brand new era that Jesus kicks off, an age of grace. And right here, this is the smoking gun. This is the key piece of evidence.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah predicted the Messiah would come to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God. But then, centuries later, when Jesus stands up to read this exact passage and announce his mission, he stops reading mid-sentence. He says he's here to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and then he rolls up the scroll.

He deliberately leaves out the day of vengeance. By doing that, Jesus was basically signaling that the day of final vengeance was being put on hold. And this leads right to Waltke's big conclusion.

The cursing psalms are doctrinally sound but practically inappropriate. What does that mean? It means the principles of God's justice they're appealing to are true and good. But the actual practice of praying for immediate judgment on your enemies, that's not for believers in this current age of grace, where the main mission is actually to pray for their salvation.

So, let's just quickly recap the big points here. These psalms are prayers for God's justice, not just personal, hateful revenge. You have to read them in their original context, where an attack on the nation was seen as an attack on God.

And the absolute key to the whole thing is that the New Testament signals a huge historical shift, postponing that final judgment and kicking off an age of grace. Understanding that shift is everything. And that leaves us with one last big question to chew on.

If taking the time to understand the historical and narrative context can solve such a thorny problem like this one, how might that same approach change the way we read other difficult and challenging texts, whether they're sacred or not? It's definitely something to think about.