

Imprecatory Psalms

In our previous lesson we studied a number of prophetic psalms that looked forward to the person and work of the Messiah. This week we are going to take a look at some of the most difficult chapters in the Bible: the imprecatory psalms.

The word “imprecatory” comes from the word “imprecate”, and it means “to call down evil curses upon someone”. The imprecatory psalms are essentially psalms of denouncement. In these hymns (for the psalms *are* hymns), the psalmist is asking God to curse someone and bring disaster upon them. These type of psalms don't get talked about very much because they are difficult to understand. Some people have wondered why these psalms are even in the Bible in the first place. After all, aren't Christians supposed to love their enemies? Aren't we supposed to do good to those who hate us? So why are there entire psalms that ask God to bring disaster upon someone else? It's a good question – and today we are going to investigate the matter and see what we can discover.

There are numerous imprecatory psalms in the Bible. The one I would like to take a look at today is Psalm 109. It was written by David, who wrote about half of the book of Psalms. In this psalm David tells us that he is in a lot of trouble. The wicked are oppressing him:

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Psalm 109:1: “Hold not thy peace, O God of my praise;
2 For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful are opened against me: they have spoken against me with a lying tongue.”

The first problem David has is that the wicked are lying about him. They are accusing him of things that are simply not true. However, that's not all they are doing:

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Psalm 109:3: “They compassed me about also with words of hatred; and fought against me without a cause.”

The wicked aren't just lying about David; they also hate him. David is being viciously attacked. As if that wasn't bad enough, he is being attacked by people who have no reason to hate him. David hasn't done anything to these people. In fact, he has actually shown these people a great deal of love and concern:

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Psalm 109:4: “For my love they are my adversaries: but I give myself unto prayer.
5 And they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love.”

David has shown these people love, and in return they hated him. David did these people much good, and in return they did him great evil. The fault is not with David; he's done everything he could to keep the peace. Yet in spite of all that, David finds himself the recipient of hatred and persecution.

This is where things take an unexpected turn. Given that Christians are to love their enemies and do good to those who hate them, you would expect David's response to be something along those lines. You would expect David to ask God to save them, or change their heart, or show mercy to them, or something like that. But that is *not* what David does. Instead David turns these wicked people over

to the devil so that Satan can persecute them:

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Psalm 109:6: "Set thou a wicked man over him: and let Satan stand at his right hand."

That alone is pretty severe – but David is just getting started. David urges God to ignore this man's prayers and condemn him when he is judged:

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Psalm 109:7: "When he shall be judged, let him be condemned: and let his prayer become sin."

David even asks God to *kill him* and give his job to someone else:

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Psalm 109:8: "Let his days be few; and let another take his office.
9 Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow."

But David is still not done. David asks God to persecute this man's children as well:

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Psalm 109:10: "Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg: let them seek their bread also out of their desolate places."

He asks God to take away all of this man's possessions:

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Psalm 109:11: "Let the extortioner catch all that he hath; and let the strangers spoil his labour."

David asks God to make sure that no one ever shows mercy to this man's family, and to utterly destroy this man's entire family line:

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Psalm 109:12: "Let there be none to extend mercy unto him: neither let there be any to favour his fatherless children.
13 Let his posterity be cut off; and in the generation following let their name be blotted out."

Finally, David asks God to never forgive this man's sin:

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Psalm 109:14: "Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered with the Lord; and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out.
15 Let them be before the Lord continually, that he may cut off the memory of them

from the earth.”

As you can see, that is a great deal of cursing! David doesn't want to see this person forgiven; instead he wants to see him dead. David wants this man to lose everything he has, and he wants the man's family to be utterly wiped off the face of the earth. David *really* has it in for this guy.

This certainly isn't the sort of prayer you would expect to find in the Bible, is it? There's really not a lot of love to be seen here. Yet this is not the only psalm that's like this. So what are we to make of these chapters?

I think it might be helpful to take a step back and look at the bigger picture. The first curious thing about this psalm is that David doesn't name any names. David just refers to “the wicked” here, but he could have easily been very specific about the people who were causing him so much trouble. In fact, with a little effort I think we can figure out who David is talking about.

There are a number of people who caused David a lot of trouble. For example, David's son Absalom rebelled against him. However, David can't be talking about him because Absalom didn't have any children (2 Samuel 18:18), but this man had a family. Shimei cursed David, but he didn't seem to have any children or any office that could be taken from him. Given what we know about David, the most likely candidate has to be Saul. No one caused David more problems than Saul did, and no one did more to persecute him. Saul certainly fits the description of the wicked person that David described!

In fact, let's take a minute to investigate the situation between David and Saul. The Bible tells us that David was one of Saul's most faithful servants:

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1 Samuel 22:14: “Then Ahimelech answered the king, and said, And who is so faithful among all thy servants as David, which is the king's son in law, and goeth at thy bidding, and is honourable in thine house?”

David worked for Saul. David led Saul's armies and married Saul's daughter. David loved Saul and worked to enlarge Saul's kingdom. Yet, in spite of all of David's faithful service, Saul absolutely *hated* David. Saul drove David out of his home:

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1 Samuel 19:11: “Saul also sent messengers unto David's house, to watch him, and to slay him in the morning; and Michal David's wife told him, saying, If thou save not thy life to night, to morrow thou shalt be slain.

12 So Michal let David down through a window: and he went, and fled, and escaped.”

Saul took David's wife and gave him to another man (which was an incredibly evil thing to do):

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1 Samuel 25:44: “But Saul had given Michal his daughter, David's wife, to Phalti the son of Laish, which was of Gallim.”

Saul did his best to kill David:

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1 Samuel 19:1: “And Saul spake to Jonathan his son, and to all his servants, that they should kill David.”

But that's not all. If that was the full extent of Saul's wickedness it would be quite severe – yet this is only the beginning of Saul's sins. Saul also offered a sacrifice to God, even though he was not a priest and therefore was not able to offer sacrifices. Saul therefore despised and profaned the holy offering of God:

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1 Samuel 13:12: “Therefore said I, The Philistines will come down now upon me to Gilgal, and I have not made supplication unto the Lord: I forced myself therefore, and offered a burnt offering.”

13a And Samuel said to Saul, Thou hast done foolishly: thou hast not kept the commandment of the Lord thy God, which he commanded thee...”

When God commanded Saul to destroy the Amalekites, Saul disobeyed the Lord and kept them alive:

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1 Samuel 15:9: “But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them: but every thing that was vile and refuse, that they destroyed utterly.”

Saul spared the enemies of God – but Saul willingly murdered Abimelech, the high priest of Israel. In fact, Saul put to death Abimelech, his fellow priests, and the *entire priestly city of Nob* – along with its women, children, and infants:

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1 Samuel 22:18: “And the king said to Doeg, Turn thou, and fall upon the priests. And Doeg the Edomite turned, and he fell upon the priests, and slew on that day fourscore and five persons that did wear a linen ephod.

19 And Nob, the city of the priests, smote he with the edge of the sword, both men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen, and asses, and sheep, with the edge of the sword.”

Saul was more than just a wicked man; he was a mass murderer. Refusing to kill the Amalekites, God's enemies, and then slaughtering an *entire city of priests* instead is an unbelievably wicked thing to do. Saul was perfectly willing to murder a whole city of people who had done him no harm. Saul was a really, *really* wicked man.

Amazingly, that is not the only mass murder that Saul was guilty of. The Bible also tells us that Saul was guilty of *genocide*:

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2 Samuel 21:1: “Then there was a famine in the days of David three years, year

after year; and David enquired of the Lord. And the Lord answered, It is for Saul, and for his bloody house, because he slew the Gibeonites.

Saul didn't stop at killing an entire city. He also did his very best to *exterminate an entire people* – a people that Israel actually had a *peace treaty* with and was sworn to protect.

When David asks God to kill the person who had been wickedly oppressing him, we need to remember what that person had actually done. Saul had forced him out of his house, had repeatedly tried to kill him, had illegally taken his wife and given her to someone else, had murdered an entire city, and was guilty of *genocide*. Considering the staggering nature of his wickedness, it's really not very surprising that David wants God to kill Saul, take away his possessions, and put an end to his family line.

Yet that last request seems a little disturbing, doesn't it? David asked God to make sure that there was no one around to “favor his fatherless children”. That seems really harsh. After all, what did Saul's children do?

As it turns out, they did a lot of terrible evil. After Saul died there actually *was* someone around to “favor his fatherless children” – the man Abner. He helped Ishbosheth, and together they launched a civil war against David:

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2 Samuel 2:8: “But Abner the son of Ner, captain of Saul's host, took Ishbosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim;

9 And made him king over Gilead, and over the Ashurites, and over Jezreel, and over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, and over all Israel.

10 Ishbosheth Saul's son was forty years old when he began to reign over Israel, and reigned two years. But the house of Judah followed David.”

With Abner's help, Ishbosheth launched a bloody campaign against David that lasted for *two years*, and which claimed many lives. If Abner had not been around then Ishbosheth would not have been able to do that, and many lives would have been saved. It would have been *much* better for Israel if Ishbosheth had been friendless and died with his father Saul. Since Saul's posterity was *not* cut off, Israel was plagued with years of war and death.

The other factor we need to consider is how David responded to Saul. Yes, David wrote Psalm 109, which asked God to curse Saul. But it's important to remember that David *never* took matters into his own hands. David had several opportunities to kill Saul, and he never took advantage of them. Each time David had the chance to take his own revenge he refused:

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1 Samuel 24:9: “And David said to Saul, Wherefore hearest thou men's words, saying, Behold, David seeketh thy hurt?

10 Behold, this day thine eyes have seen how that the Lord had delivered thee to day into mine hand in the cave: and some bade me kill thee: but mine eye spared thee; and I said, I will not put forth mine hand against my lord; for he is the Lord's anointed.”

In fact, David actually *put to death* the man who claimed to have killed Saul:

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2 Samuel 1:14: “And David said unto him, How wast thou not afraid to stretch forth thine hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?”

15 And David called one of the young men, and said, Go near, and fall upon him. And he smote him that he died.”

But that's not all. Do you know what David did when he heard that Saul was dead? He *mourned*:

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2 Samuel 1:11: “Then David took hold on his clothes, and rent them; and likewise all the men that were with him:

12 And they mourned, and wept, and fasted until even, for Saul, and for Jonathan his son, and for the people of the Lord, and for the house of Israel; because they were fallen by the sword.”

In fact, David actually wrote a eulogy for Saul! The eulogy is truly remarkable. Instead of condemning Saul for all the horrible and wicked things he did, David urged Israel to remember all the good that Saul had done for them:

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2 Samuel 1:24: “Ye daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights, who put on ornaments of gold upon your apparel.

25a How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle!...”

When David had a chance to revenge himself, he refused. When David had a chance to condemn Saul after his death, he refused. David *never* reached out his own hand to harm Saul or Saul's children. Instead David asked God to judge him. In doing so David did exactly what the Lord had commanded Israel to do:

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Leviticus 19:17: “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him.

18 Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord.”

Did David ever avenge himself? No, he didn't. He did rebuke Saul for his wickedness (which is what verse 17 commanded), but he never took matters into his own hands. David definitely wanted God to judge Saul, but David never hated him. If David had hated Saul then he would have *rejoiced* when Saul was killed – but he didn't. If David had hated Saul then the eulogy he wrote would have been full of Saul's sins – but David didn't bring up any of the evil that Saul had done. In fact, each time David confronted Saul for trying to kill him *David didn't even yell at him*. Instead David simply rebuked the king and asked for peace.

David put the whole matter into the hands of God. In Psalm 109 he poured out his heart to God and asked the Lord to put an end to Saul's wickedness – and then David left it there. David had many chances to rain down pain and suffering upon Saul's family *and he never did*. If we had been in David's

place, can we honestly say that we would have handled things as well as he did?

Yes, David did ask God to curse Saul. That is true. David was very unhappy about the wickedness that he saw in Saul. But we sometimes forget that *God* was unhappy about it as well. In fact, as unhappy as David was over Saul's behavior, the truth is that God was *vastly* more unhappy about it. God got to the point where He refused to answer Saul:

1 Samuel 28:6: "And when Saul enquired of the Lord, the Lord answered him not, neither by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets."

God was done having compassion on this man. In fact, God actually became Saul's *enemy*:

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1 Samuel 28:15: "And Samuel said to Saul, Why hast thou disquieted me, to bring me up? And Saul answered, I am sore distressed; for the Philistines make war against me, and God is departed from me, and answereth me no more, neither by prophets, nor by dreams: therefore I have called thee, that thou mayest make known unto me what I shall do.

16 Then said Samuel, Wherefore then dost thou ask of me, seeing the Lord is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy?"

Saul had spent his life doing whatever he wanted. He persecuted the people of God, murdered the priests of God, and slaughtered an entire people group that Israel had sworn to protect. When Saul was in trouble he expected God to bail him out – but God refused. Instead God killed him in battle and put an end to his wicked reign.

This brings up a side of God that we don't talk about very often. Yes, it is true that God is a God of love and compassion. He will indeed show mercy to all who repent – but Saul never repented. God will forgive all those who seek forgiveness, no matter what terrible sins they have done – but Saul wasn't interested in any of that. Saul was a deeply wicked man, and *God was angry with him*.

You see, God is angry with the wicked:

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Psalms 7:11: "God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day.

12 If he turn not, he will whet his sword; he hath bent his bow, and made it ready.

13 He hath also prepared for him the instruments of death; he ordaineth his arrows against the persecutors."

Take a close look at what this psalm says. It doesn't say that God is angry at sin. No, it says that God is angry with *the wicked*. We tend to think that God loves the sinner but hates the sin, but you will not find that statement anywhere in the Bible. Instead you will find a great many verses where God clearly displays His tremendous anger at the wicked.

Verse 12 explains what is going on. If the wicked man repents – if he turns from his wickedness – then God will have compassion on him. God shows mercy to all who repent and believe on His Son. However, if the wicked person does *not* repent – if he continues on in his sin, the way Saul did – then the anger of the Lord will burn hot against him. That man will not receive mercy, for he has rejected it. Instead he will face the sword of the Lord. That man will be marked for death, and God will destroy

him and pour out His wrath upon him.

God offers great mercy to the wicked – but if they refuse Him then He will show them no compassion or love whatsoever. Those who refuse His mercy will instead face a wrath that they cannot endure. In fact, God said that when He calls someone to repent and they refuse, He will actually *laugh* when their day of trouble finally comes:

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Proverbs 1:24: “Because I have called, and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; ...

26 I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your fear cometh;

27 When your fear cometh as desolation, and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you.

28 Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me:

29 For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the Lord.”

When a person makes the same choice that Saul did and continues on in their sin, that person cannot expect to receive any compassion from the Lord. When they are in trouble God will not pity them. You see, God *already* offered them mercy and compassion. He already offered to forgive all their sins and give them everlasting life and joy, if they would only repent and believe. Jesus Christ actually shed His own blood and died a horrific, torturous death in order to pay the penalty for sin – and yet they still would not repent! So, since they rejected God's mercy, they will receive no mercy. Since they would not take God's pity when He offered it to them, they will instead face His wrath – wrath that will be poured out without mercy or pity or the least bit of consideration.

Does the Bible actually say this? It certainly does. In fact, it says it in both the Old and New Testaments:

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Ezekiel 8:18: “Therefore will I also deal in fury: mine eye shall not spare, neither will I have pity: and though they cry in mine ears with a loud voice, yet will I not hear them.”

James 2:13: “For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment.”

Why is God doing this? *Because He offered them His mercy and they rejected it.* They had their chance.

There came a time at the end of Saul's life when he *did* try to cry out to God. The problem with Saul was that he didn't cry out in repentance and belief. He wasn't sorry for his wicked life and he wasn't trying to make things right. No, Saul was still a wicked man right down to his last breath. The only reason he was trying to reach God was to get God to bail him out of his latest problem. But guess what? *God refused.* God had become Saul's enemy and was determined to destroy him.

It's true that God is loving and merciful to all those who repent. However, *God is not merciful to those who do not repent.* The Lord has no mercy in store for the wicked. After all, Jesus Christ shed His own blood to make an atonement for sin, and instead of repenting and believing they continued on in their wickedness. Since the wicked refused His mercy God has promised them terrible wrath:

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Isaiah 63:3: “I have trodden the winepress alone; and of the people there was none with me: for I will tread them in mine anger, and trample them in my fury; and their blood shall be sprinkled upon my garments, and I will stain all my raiment.”

We need to understand that God is *incredibly* angry with the wicked. The Lord urges them to repent, because if they repent they will not face His wrath. If they repent and believe in Christ then they will find mercy. Then God will love them and care for them and will give them hope and a future.

But if they do not repent then they will face the full brunt of the Lord's anger – and the Lord's anger is terrifying beyond imagination. The verse from Isaiah 63 is talking about the Second Coming. When the Lord returns He will pour out His wrath upon His enemies. In that day the wicked will cry out, but by then it will be much too late. When judgment finally comes, the time of mercy is over. In that day it is far too late to ask for pity. You had your chance. This is how Jonathan Edwards described that verse:

“If you cry to God to pity you, he will be so far from pitying you in your doleful case, or showing you the least regard or favour, that instead of that, he will only tread you under foot. And though he will know that you cannot bear the weight of omnipotence treading upon you, yet he will not regard that, but he will crush you under his feet without mercy; he will crush out your blood, and make it fly, and it shall be sprinkled on his garments, so as to stain all his raiment. He will not only hate you, but he will have you, in the utmost contempt: no place shall be thought fit for you, but under his feet to be trodden down as the mire of the streets.” (Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the hands of an angry God*)

It is not just the Old Testament that describes God's wrath in such violent and graphic terms. If anything, the New Testament is even more brutal. This is what the book of Revelation has to say about those who will take the Mark of the Beast during the Tribulation period:

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Revelation 14:10: “The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb:

11 And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.”

The wrath of God is a very serious thing. It is an awful thing to endure; in fact, it *cannot* be endured. That is why it is so important to repent now, while there is still time. The wrath of God *can* be avoided. God is merciful to all who repent, and He will refuse none who come to Him.

It is not just David who sought to curse the wicked. We need to remember that *God* is vastly angrier with the wicked than David ever dreamed of being. God is the one who you need to be concerned about. Jesus Himself made that very point:

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Matthew 10:28: “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.”

Jesus was warning everyone that the wrath of God was a real and serious thing. Since it was a real and serious thing, Jesus urged people to repent and believe in Him so they would not face it. Jesus was telling people *in advance* of the great danger they were in *so that they could avoid it*. The wrath of God is entirely avoidable.

The question is, what choice are you going to make? Many people are simply unwilling to turn their life over to Christ. They want to be in charge. Instead of obeying God and keeping His commandments they want to live as they please. They have no desire for holiness, and instead seek to do what is right in their own eyes. These people may be happy with their lives, but God is not. Saul was a person who lived as he pleased and did whatever he wanted. In the end he faced the wrath of God – and so will all who follow in his footsteps.

There is only one way to escape the wrath of God, and that is to surrender your life to Christ. You must repent of your sins and believe in the Messiah whom God has sent, and who shed His own blood as payment for your sins. Surrendering your life means that God is in charge. It means that you will do the things that *God* wants instead of the things that *you* want. It means that you will seek to obey the Lord in all things. It means that you sacrifice your own will and instead seek to do the Lord's will. In order to live forever in a world free from evil and death you must die to your own desires and give yourself wholly to the Lord. It means you have to cast aside all the sins that are holding you back and seek holiness. If you believe in Christ and turn your life over to God then the Lord will have mercy on you. The Lord will spare your soul, and you will never face the wrath of God.

But if you do not – if you continue in your sins – then do not delude yourself into thinking that everything is going to be all right. The wicked may have their day in this life, but judgment is coming. Now is the day to avoid it, while there is still time. The day is rapidly approaching when it will be too late – and when that day comes God will show you no pity and no mercy. If you seek the mercy and forgiveness of God then *now* is the time to obtain it, while you are still alive.