

# Imprecatory Psalms

In this document we're 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 means “to call down evil curses upon someone”. The imprecatory psalms are essentially psalms of denouncement. In these hymns (because 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 often because they're difficult for many people to understand. Some have wondered why these psalms are in the Bible in the first place. Aren't Christians supposed to love their enemies and do good to those who hate us? Why are there psalms that ask God to bring disaster upon other people? It's a good question – and we're going to investigate the matter and see what we can learn.

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

**Psalm 109:1-2:** “Hold not thy peace, O God of my praise; 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're accusing him of things that aren't true. However, that's not all they're doing:

**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 was being viciously attacked by people who had no reason to hate him. David hadn't done anything to these people. In fact, he actually showed them a great deal of love and concern:

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

David had loved these people and in return they hated him. David had done these people much good and in return they did him great evil. The fault wasn't with David because he had done everything he could to keep the peace. Yet in spite of all that David found himself the recipient of hatred and persecution.

This is where things take an unexpected turn. Given that Christians are commanded to love their enemies and do good to those who hate them, you'd expect David's response to be something along those lines. You would expect him to ask God to save them, or change their heart, or show mercy to them. But that's *not* what David did. Instead David turned these wicked people over to the devil so that Satan could persecute them:

**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 was just getting started. David urged God to ignore this man's prayers and condemn him when he was judged:

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

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

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

But David *still* wasn't done. David asked God to persecute this man's children as well:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

cut off the memory of them from the earth.”

That's a lot of cursing! David didn't want to see this person forgiven; instead he wanted him dead. David wanted this man to lose everything he had, and his family to be wiped off the face of the earth.

This isn't the sort of prayer you'd expect to find in the Bible, is it? There's not a lot of love to be seen here. Yet this isn't 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”, but he could have been very specific about the person who was causing him so much trouble. In fact, with a little effort I think we can figure out who David was 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), and yet the man described in Psalm 109 had a family. Shimei cursed David but he didn't seem to have any children or any office that could be taken away from him. Given what we know about David the most likely candidate is 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!

Let's take a look at the situation between David and Saul. The Bible tells us that David was one of Saul's most faithful servants:

**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, led Saul's armies into battle, and married Saul's daughter. David loved Saul and put his life on the line 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:

**1 Samuel 19:11-12:** "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. 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):

**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:

**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 his sins. Saul also offered a sacrifice to God even though he wasn't a priest and therefore wasn't allowed to offer sacrifices. Saul therefore despised and profaned the holy offering of God:

**1 Samuel 13:12-13:** “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. 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 spared them:

**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 saved the enemies of God – but he 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:

**1 Samuel 22:18-19:** “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. 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. It's exceptionally evil to refuse to kill God's enemies

(the Amalekites) and then slaughter an *entire city of priests*. Saul was willing to murder a whole city of people who had done him no harm. Saul was an extremely wicked man.

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

**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 had a *peace treaty* with and was sworn to protect.

When David asked God to kill the person who had been oppressing him, we need to remember what Saul had actually done. Saul forced him out of his house, repeatedly tried to kill him, took his wife and gave her to someone else, murdered an entire city, and committed *genocide*. Considering the staggering nature of his wickedness it's not surprising that David wanted 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 there was no one around to “favor his fatherless children”. That seems really harsh. After all, what did Saul's children do?

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

**2 Samuel 2:8-10:** “But Abner the son of Ner, captain of Saul's host, took Ishbosheth the son of Saul, and brought him over to Mahanaim; And made him king over Gilead, and over the

Ashurites, and over Jezreel, and over Ephraim, and over Benjamin, and over all Israel. 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 hadn't been around then Ishbosheth wouldn't 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. It's true that 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 didn't take advantage of any of them. Each time David had the chance to take his own revenge he refused:

**1 Samuel 24:9-10:** “And David said to Saul, Wherefore hearest thou men's words, saying, Behold, David seeketh thy hurt? 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:

**2 Samuel 1:14-15:** “And David said unto him, How wast thou not afraid to stretch forth thine



hand to destroy the Lord's anointed? 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*:

**2 Samuel 1:11-12:** “Then David took hold on his clothes, and rent them; and likewise all the men that were with him: 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.”

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:

**2 Samuel 1:24-15:** “Ye daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights, who put on ornaments of gold upon your apparel. How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! . . .”

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

**Leviticus 19:17-18:** “Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon

him. 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 avenge himself? No, he didn't. He did rebuke Saul for his wickedness (which is what verse 17 commands) but he never took matters into his own hands. David wanted God to judge Saul but he 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 his eulogy 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 send pain and suffering upon Saul and his 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 upset about the terrible wickedness that he saw in Saul. But the Bible tells us that *God* was upset about it as well. In fact, as upset as David was over Saul's behavior, the truth is that God was *vastly* more upset about it. God got to the point where He refused to answer Saul at all:

**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 Saul. In fact, God actually became Saul's *enemy*:

**1 Samuel 28:15-16:** “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. Then said Samuel, Wherefore then dost thou ask of me, seeing the Lord is departed from thee, and is become thine enemy?”

Saul spent his life doing whatever he wanted. He persecuted the people of God, he murdered the priests of God, and he slaughtered an entire nation 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 isn't mentioned very often. It's 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've done – but Saul wasn't interested in that. Saul was a deeply wicked man and *God was angry with him*.

You see, God is angry with the wicked:

**Psalm 7:11-13:** “God judgeth the righteous, and God is angry with the wicked every day. If he turn not, he will whet his sword; he hath bent his bow, and made it ready. 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 people's sin. No, it says that God is angry with *the wicked*. Some people teach that God loves the sinner but hates the sin, but you won't find that statement anywhere in the

Bible. Instead you'll find a great many verses where God clearly displays His tremendous anger at the wicked.

Verse 12 explains what's going on. If the wicked man repents and turns from his wickedness then God will have compassion on him. God shows mercy to all who repent and believe on His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. 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 won't receive mercy because he has rejected it. Instead he will face the sword of the Lord. That man will be marked for death, and one day God will pour out His wrath upon him and destroy 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 reject His mercy and offer of salvation will face an everlasting wrath they can't endure. God said that when He calls someone to repent and they refuse, He will actually *laugh at them* when their day of trouble finally comes:

**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 can't expect to receive any compassion from the Lord. When they're in trouble God won't

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 shed His own blood and died a horrific and torturous death to pay the penalty for sin – and yet they still won't repent! Since they rejected God's mercy they'll receive no mercy. Since they wouldn't take God's pity when He offered it to them they will instead face His wrath – a wrath that will be poured out without mercy or pity for all of eternity.

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

**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.*

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 the Lord to rescue him from 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 isn't merciful to those who don't repent.* The Lord has no mercy in store for the wicked. Why? Because Jesus Christ shed His own blood to make an atonement for sin,

and instead of repenting and believing the wicked continued on in their wickedness. Since they rejected His mercy God has promised them terrible wrath:

**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.”

God is *incredibly* angry with the wicked. The Lord urges them to repent because if they repent they won't face His wrath. If they repent and believe in Jesus Christ then they'll find mercy. Then God will love them and care for them and give them hope and a future.

However, if they don't repent then they will surely face the full brunt of the Lord's anger – and His anger is terrifying beyond imagination. The verse from Isaiah 63 is talking about the Second Coming. When Jesus returns He will pour out His wrath upon His enemies. In that day the wicked will cry out, but by then it will be too late. When the day of judgment finally comes, the time of mercy is over. In that day it's too late to ask for pity.

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's not just the Old Testament which describes God's wrath in such violent and graphic terms. The New Testament is even more clear about it. This is what the book of Revelation has to say about those who take the Mark of the Beast during the Tribulation period:

**Revelation 14:10-11:** “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: 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's an awful thing to endure; in fact, it *cannot* be endured. That's why it's so important to repent now, while there's still time. The wrath of God *can* be avoided! God is merciful to all who repent and believe in Jesus, and He will reject no one who comes to Him.

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

**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 warned us that the wrath of God is very real and very serious, and urged everyone to repent and believe in Him so they wouldn't face it. Jesus was telling people *in advance* of the great danger they were in *so they could avoid it*. The wrath of God is *entirely avoidable!*

What choice are you going to make? Many people are unwilling to turn their life over to Christ because 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 whatever is right in their own eyes. These people may be happy with their lives, but God is extremely angry with them. Saul lived as he pleased and did whatever he wanted, and in the end he faced the wrath of God. All those who follow in his footsteps will be judged as well, and will be cast into everlasting torment.

There's only one way to escape the wrath of God and that's to surrender your life to Christ. You must repent of your sins and believe in Jesus, 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 you will seek to obey the Lord in all things. It means that you give up your own will and seek to do God's will.

In order to be saved you must sacrifice your own desires and give yourself wholly to the Lord. You must cast aside all the sins that are holding you back and seek holiness. If you believe that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead on the third day, and if you ask God to forgive your sins and you give your life to Him, then God will have mercy on you. He will spare your soul and you will never face the wrath of God.

If you don't do those things – if you continue on in your sins – then things are not going to go well for you. The wicked may have their day in this life, but judgment is coming. One day



you will be cast into the Lake of Fire and tormented day and night for all of eternity (Revelation 20:14-15).

Now is the day to avoid it, while there's 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 desire God's mercy and forgiveness then *now* is the time to obtain it, while you're still alive.