

The Doctrine of the Imprecatory Psalms

These studies are designed for believers in Jesus Christ only. If you have exercised faith in Christ, then you are in the right place. If you have not, then you need to heed the words of our Lord, Who said, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son, so that every [one] believing [or, trusting] in Him shall not perish, but shall have eternal life! For God did not send His Son into the world so that He should judge the world, but so that the world shall be saved through Him. The one believing [or, trusting] in Him is not judged, but the one not believing has already been judged, because he has not believed in the Name of the only-begotten [or, uniquely-born] Son of God." (John 3:16–18). "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life! No one comes to the Father except through [or, by means of] Me!" (John 14:6).

Every study of the Word of God ought to be preceded by a naming of your sins to God. This restores you to fellowship with God (1John 1:8–10). If there are people around, you would name these sins silently. If there is no one around, then it does not matter if you name them silently or whether you speak aloud.

Introduction: An imprecatory prayer is where you pray against one of your enemies or against your nation's enemies. We find many psalms with such prayers. How are we to understand this in the light of Jesus saying, "Pray for your enemies and for those who spitefully use you." ?

Added to this doctrine is **Do We Pray for Our Enemies or Against Them?** (taken from the exegesis of Psalms 41 and 55). This is basically a second run at this same doctrine.

1. An imprecatory psalm is a psalm written which invokes God's wrath upon His enemies—which are usually the enemies of Israel, although they could be the enemies of the psalmist.
2. The imprecatory psalms include Psalms 7 35 58 69 83 109 137.
 - a. Psalm 7 is written by David and does not really ask God to bring evil upon the evil; he treats this as a fact, as a natural cause and effect; for instance: Behold, he has birth pangs of wickedness, and he conceives emptiness and brings forth falsehood. He has dug a pit and hollowed it out, And then he has fallen into the hole which he made. His mischief will return upon his own head, And his violence will descent upon his own crown (Psalm 7:14–16).
 - b. Psalm 35 was also written by David. A person in power will have a lot of enemies.
 - i. Psalm 35 is more of a true imprecatory psalm. Contend, O Jehovah, with those who contend with me; Fight against those who fight against me. Take hold of the small shield and the large shield and rise up for my help. Draw also the spear and the battle-axe to meet those who pursue me. Say to my soul, "I am your deliverance." (Psalm 35:1–3).
 - ii. This particular psalm also looks forward to the trial and execution of our Lord: Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know. They repay me evil for good to the bereavement of my soul. But as for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth; I humbled m soul with fasting and my prayer kept returning to my bosom. I went about as though it were my friend or brother. I bowed down mourning, as one who sorrows for a mother. But at my stumbling, they rejoiced, and gathered themselves together; the strikers whom I did not know gathered together against me. They slandered me without ceasing, like godless jesters at a feast, they gnashed at me with their teeth. Lord, how long will You look on? Rescue my soul from their ravages, my only life from the lions. (Psalm 35:11–17).
 - iii. Psalm 35 ends with: Let them shout for joy and rejoice, who favor my vindication, and let them say continually "Jehovah is magnified, Who delight sin the prosperity of His servant." And my tongue will declare Your righteousness and Your praise all day long (vv. 27–28).
 - c. Psalm 58 was also authored by David.
 - i. David recognizes that men are evil from birth—particularly his enemies. Do you indeed speak righteousness, O judges [lit., gods]? Do you judge uprightly, O sons of men? No, in heart you work unrighteousness; on earth you weigh out the violence of your hands. The wicked are estranged from the womb; those who speak lies go astray from birth (Psalm 58:1–3).
 - ii. David is unmistakably clear with what he desires God to do: O God, shatter their teeth in their mouth; break out the fangs of the young lions, O Jehovah. Let them flow away like water that

runs off...Let them be as a snail which melts away as it goes along, like the miscarriage of a woman which never see the sun...The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will wash his feet in the blood of the wicked (Psalm 58:6–7a, 8, 10).

- iii. David in this psalm gives a reason for these desires: **And men will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God Who judges on earth!"** (Psalm 38:11).
 - d. Psalm 69 is written by David as well.
 - i. As in the previous psalm, this looks both at David's distress and at our Lord's suffering at the cross. **Deliver me, O God, for the waters have threatened my life. I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold. I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me. I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes fail while I wait for my God. Those who hate me without a cause are more than the hairs of my head. Those who would destroy me are powerful** (Psalm 69:1–4a).
 - ii. David is under discipline in this particular psalm. **O God, it is You Who knows my folly, and my wrongs are not hidden from You** (Psalm 69:5).
 - iii. David prays for his own deliverance: **Deliver me from the mire, and do not let me sink. May I be delivered from my foes, and from the deep waters. May the flood of water not overflow me, and may the deep not swallow me up. May the pit not shut its mouth on me** (Psalm 69:13–15).
 - iv. However, this is clearly an imprecatory psalm: **May their table before them become a snare and when they are in prosperity, a trap. May their eyes grow dim so that they cannot see and make their loins shake continually [with fear]. Pour out Your indignation upon them and may Your burning anger overtake them** (Psalm 69:22–24).
 - e. Psalm 83 is the psalm which we are going to study. Without going into any detail, the psalmist (this time Asaph, and not David), names the enemies of Israel (vv. 4–8) and then asks for them to be dealt with as God dealt with Sisera, Jabin, Oreb, Zeeb, Zebah and Zalmunna, all enemies of Israel in the book of the Judges (vv. 9–12). This is one of the more specific psalms when naming the enemies of Israel.
 - f. In Psalm 109, we return to the psalms of David, who wrote about half of the psalms and almost all of the imprecatory ones.
 - i. Like Psalm 69, there are parallels between our Lord's walk on this earth and David's experiences: **O God of my praise, do not be silent. For they have opened the wicked and deceitful mouth against me; they have spoke against me with a lying tongue. They have also surrounded me with words of hatred, and they fought against me without a cause, in return for my love, they act as my accusers** (Psalm 109:1–4a).
 - ii. David asks God to avenge him against these men. **Appoint a wicked man over him and let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is judged, let him come forth guilty and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few; and let another take his position. Let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. Let his children wander about and beg and let them seek sustenance far from their ruined homes. Let the creditor seize all that he has and let strangers plunder the product of his labor** (Psalm 109:6–11). David, in fact, carries on for another 9 verses and then he takes up after them again in the last few verses as well.
 - g. Psalm 137 is a lot more like Psalm 83. This is Israel under captivity to Babylon. Primarily in this psalm we have this feeling of sadness of what Israel had been and that they had been deported to Babylon. Only in a couple of the verses do we have them calling for the destruction of Babylon. **Remember, o Jehovah, against the sons of Edom. The day of Jerusalem, who said, "Raze it, raze it, to its very foundation." O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one, how blessed will be the one who repays you with the recompense with which you have repaid us. How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock** (Psalm 137:7–9). In fact, you will notice that the psalmist does not even specifically ask God to destroy Babylon, but says that the one who destroys Babylon will be blessed.
3. In one imprecatory psalm, it ends with saying something rather remarkable about the enemies, to wit:
 - a. **Fill their faces with dishonor, that they may seek Your name, O Jehovah. Let them be ashamed and dismayed forever and let them be humiliated and perish, that they may know that You alone, Whose name is Jehovah, are the Most High over all the earth** (Psalm 83:16–18). The psalmist asks for much

- more than their destruction and humiliation; he also asks that they seek the name of Jehovah and that they come to know that He is God over all the earth.
- b. Our Lord said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You will love your neighbor and you will hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matt. 5:43–44 Lev. 19:18). The pharisees had distorted Scripture and they taught love you neighbor and hate your enemy; but this was not the teaching of Scripture. Even here, in the imprecatory psalms, the psalmist prays for his enemies.
4. Do not become confused; the Old Testament did not teach that we love our neighbor and hate our enemy.
 - a. Do not say, “I will repay evil”; Wait for Jehovah, and He will deliver you (Prov. 20:22).
 - b. Do not rejoice when your enemy falls and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles (Prov. 24:17).
 - c. Jonah went to some of Israel’s greatest enemies in Nineveh and preached the gospel (this was against his own personal wishes; but God convinced him to go). His evangelizing was quite successful, much to his own personal chagrin, and this is the story of the book of Jonah.
 - d. Also bear in mind that David, who wrote the most scathing of the imprecatory psalms, still would not harm King Saul, his greatest enemy, who stood between him and the crown. Even after he was told that he would become king, David allowed events to unravel without taking vengeance upon Saul. King Saul was God’s anointed and it was not David’s prerogative to remove Saul from the throne, as God had not issued any such order to David.
 - e. There are many of us who have come to God, having been filled with shame and dishonor at our own lives and our own choices and actions. Prior to that, we were at enmity with God and He took us and called us sons, placing us into Christ Jesus.
 - f. If you are wondering what about the book of Joshua and what about the book of the Judges? Did not Israel destroy her enemies in huge clumps at that time? We have covered that in those books; particularly in the book of Joshua. The people whom God ordered Israel to destroy were people whose heart was turned completely and unrepentantly against God. We are dealing with people whose souls are hardened to the point of never coming to God. At that point, they may be removed from this earth (however, note: only on specific orders from God; we do not get to go out and indiscriminately—or discriminately—remove heathen from this earth).
 - g. Even from the earliest times, Scripture taught: Vengeance is Mine, and retribution (Deut. 32:35a). Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath, for it stands written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.” (Rom. 12:19 Deut. 32:35a). In the Septuagint, it reads: In the day of vengeance, I will repay (Deut. 32:35a).¹
 5. There is no little confusion at this point, and theologians have argued for centuries, falsely alleging a discrepancy between the Old and New Testaments. Zodiates explains: *The historic Christian view approves of imprecation, but pints out a number of stipulations that apply. First of all, though it is impossible to remove entirely the personal aspect of these requests, the vengeance that is prayed for is actually more of a vindication. The wicked have not been provoked, nor do they commit acts of which the psalmist himself is guilty. Instead, the psalmist is concerned about God’s reputation and cause. The imprecatory psalms exhibit only a righteous indignation for sin in which it is impossible to separate the sin from the sinner. The issue is given over to God (Ps. 35:1, 2; 69:7; 2 Tim. 4:14). Those who hate God and commit heinous sin will some day be judged for their wickedness. Believers should groan in agony that even one soul shall endure eternal punishment, yet they must accept the righteousness of God in so doing. It is helpful to remember that these psalms are not hastily worded expressions of anger, but carefully written works of literature. Moreover, they are not the result of human hands, but inspired by the Holy Spirit. Like all Scriptural warnings, these psalms could be instrumental in the conversion of sinners.*²
 6. Some of the issues raised are by believers whose Bibles only hold a small number of verses. They read and apply a limited amount of Scripture; and then spend most of their time explaining away (or, ignoring) what remains. We have to take a balanced view, which is the key to understanding theological issues such as *predestination, election and free will*; and those presented in this doctrine.

¹ Paul obviously used the Septuagint and took some liberties with the text.

² *The Complete Word Study Old Testament*; Dr. S. Zodiates; ©1994 AMG Publishers; p. 1529.

This leads us to a rather difficult situation: do we pray against our enemies or do we pray for them? When we were fighting World War II, was it proper to drop bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or should we have been praying for our enemies, the Japanese instead? Here is where we must properly divide the Word of Truth.

This doctrine was first placed in **Psalm 41** ([HTML](#)) ([PDF](#)) ([WPD](#)).

Do We Pray for Our Enemies or Against Them?

7. This psalm, along with several others, is known as an imprecatory psalm or it has imprecatory elements. That is, David prays against his enemies; David prays to defeat his enemies; David prays to pay back his enemies what they deserve.
 - a. David prays: *And You, O Y^ehowah, show grace to me, and raise me up, that I may recompense them* (Psalm 41:10). *Destroy [them], my Adonai; confuse [lit., divide up] their tongues; for I have seen violence and strife in the city* (Psalm 55:9).
 - b. There are a number of imprecatory psalms. Here are some examples of petitions made to God in these psalms: *Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave* (Psalm 55:15). *O God, break the teeth in their mouths* (Psalm 58:6). *May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous* (Psalm 69:28). *May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow* (Psalm 109:9). *How blessed will be the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks* (Psalm 137:9).
8. Yet Jesus, our Lord, said, *“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who despitefully use you and persecute you, so that you may become sons of your Father in Heaven. For He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same?”* (Matt. 5:43–46; Lev. 19:18; MKJV).
9. It is not simply an Old versus New Testament difference. There are Scriptures which exhort us to pray for our enemies: Matt 5:39, 44 Luke 23:34 Rom 12:14 1Cor 4:12 1Thess 5:15.
10. There are New Testament Scriptures where cursing is done against certain people: Matt 21:18–21 25:41 Acts 8:20 13:10–11 Gal 1:8–9 1Cor 16:22 Rev 6:10 22:18–19. What you actually say, even in a private prayer, can be quite powerful.
11. The short answer, without much nuance, is, David is speaking of the enemies of Israel who seek to revolt against him; and against the military enemies of Israel; while Jesus is speaking of personal enemies. Although that comes close to dealing with this problem, it does not solve it completely. “Hate your enemies” was applied by the Jews against the Romans who dominated them.
12. There is a place for both approaches, and here is where the nuance works in. We faced, in WWII, a dreadful and vicious coalition of enemies in the Germans and the Japanese. The Germans were constructing death camps and destroying all of their Jews, which indicates an evil attributable only to Satanic influence. Therefore, the Germans had to be defeated and their death camps made public in every way possible.
13. This does not mean that we should engender great hate against the Germans or the Japanese. In war, we needed to defeat them, and by any means possible. We used atomic weapons against the Japanese. What we did in WWII was righteous, and it was the hand of God destroying His enemies.
14. However, once we had defeated the Germans and the Japanese, it was a whole new story, one that, insofar as I know, had never been written before in human history. We went in and administered rulership in these countries with the intention of eventually returning the sovereignty back over to these people. This was an amazing thing which the United States did, and ought to make every American beam with pride of country and patriotism.
15. General Douglas MacArthur ruled over Japan, **calling for missionaries and Bibles** for all of these regions in the east, saying that there was a spiritual vacuum there and it would be filled by Christianity or Communism (which has been the great struggle of my lifetime—today, Islam has become more dominant as a Satanic influence).

Do We Pray for Our Enemies or Against Them?

16. Therefore, we rightfully prayed to defeat our enemies in WWII, the Germans and the Japanese; but then, instead of subjecting them to a generation of American control, we guided them toward a friendship with the United States, toward freedom and self-determination; and we gave them the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is one of the greatest testimonies of human history to both the words of Jesus and the prayers of King David. We both righteously defeated our enemies and then we showed them the love of God.

Although I know that General MacArthur was the primary force in this, I would find it interesting to see what the reaction from the state department was. How did President Truman view this? Were there those who tried to stop MacArthur? It is a fascinating period of history which Satan would certain rather that we forgive about.