

Evaluating Interpretive Approaches (Selected Psalms)

All right, we are today evaluating the interpretive approaches to imprecatory psalms. In the past few weeks, we have kind of looked at the Psalms themselves and seen some of the abrasive and aggressive elements of the imprecations in the Psalms. And so today, we're going to deal with some of the different interpretive approaches that people have taken to the imprecatory psalms. And these are going to be what I would say are false approaches or inadequate hermeneutical approaches to the Psalms.

I have raised over the last several weeks sort of the issue of imprecations. We've talked about what it is, and then we have wrestled with some of the theology behind that in terms of just raising the issues that we need to address. And so today, we're going to eliminate what I think are inadequate interpretive approaches to the Psalms. And then next week, we're—sorry, not next week. Next week is Resurrection Sunday. So the following week after that—we don't have any Sunday school next week. The following week after that, we're going to look at two imprecatory psalms, more specifically, Psalm 69 and Psalm 109. And then the week after that, I've just got a list of observations and points that I want to make about imprecatory psalms. And then hopefully the last week in this series, we will sort of wrap it all up and present, I think, what would be sort of a theological approach to these psalms and how we interpret them.

All right, to review, an imprecatory psalm or an imprecatory prayer is a prayer or a psalm that invokes evil or asks for a curse upon someone or upon evil itself. The imprecatory psalms are those, therefore, that ask God to send harm or evil upon someone. It is a prayer that asks God to judge someone or calls down a curse or an anathema. It is a prayer or a psalm that calls for evil to befall somebody, to bring calamity upon someone, destruction, disaster, or judgment.

And there are some examples of imprecatory psalms just to remind you of what we're looking at. Psalm 68:1–2: “Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered, and let those who hate Him flee before Him. As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, so let the wicked perish before God.”

Jeremiah 10:25: “Pour out Your wrath on the nations that do not know You and on the families that do not call Your name; for they have devoured Jacob . . . and have laid waste his habitation.”

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Psalm 79:10: “Why should the nations say, ‘Where is their God?’ Let there be known among the nations in our sight, vengeance for the blood of Your servants which has been shed.”

Psalm 79:12: “And return to our neighbors sevenfold into their bosom the reproach which they have reproached You, O Lord.”

Notice there that the author is calling for God to do something about the wicked. And of course, these imprecations are specific, and these imprecations are sometimes very graphic.

Then there are examples of God being worshipped because of His judgments upon the wicked. Psalm 7:12–17:

12 If a man does not repent, He will sharpen His sword; He has bent His bow and made it ready.

13 He has also prepared for Himself deadly weapons; He makes His arrows fiery shafts.

14 Behold, he travails with wickedness, and he conceives mischief and brings forth falsehood.

15 He has dug a pit and hollowed it out, and has fallen into the hole which he made.

16 His mischief will return upon his own head, and his violence will descend upon his own pate.

17 I will give thanks to the Lord according to His righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the Lord Most High. (NASB)

So there the author is praising God for His righteous judgments upon the wicked and thanking God that God is going to destroy the wicked for their wickedness.

Psalm 149:

1 Praise the Lord! Sing to the Lord a new song, and His praise in the congregation of the godly ones.

2 Let Israel be glad in his Maker; let the sons of Zion rejoice in their King.

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3 Let them praise His name with dancing; let them sing praises to Him with timbrel and lyre.

4 For the Lord takes pleasure in His people; He will beautify the afflicted ones with salvation.

5 Let the godly ones exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds.

6 Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their hand,

7 to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples,

8 to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron,

9 to execute on them the judgment written; this is an honor for all His godly ones. Praise the Lord! (Ps. 149:1–9 NASB)

Now some of these imprecations are obviously severe. Some of them are personal. And as I mentioned last week, and all of this is just by way of review, as we mentioned last week, two-thirds of the Psalms have imprecatory elements like this in them, two-thirds of them. Not two-thirds of the Psalter. That's not to say two-thirds of the text. But two-thirds of the number of the Psalms have imprecatory elements like this in them. Ninety-seven psalms in total by my count, and I challenged you last week to do your own reading through the Psalter and to identify either prayers asking God for judgment or praise for God's righteous judgments or mentions of that judgment and to take count of the number for yourself. I came up with ninety-seven, which means that fifty-three have no imprecatory elements in them at all. There are forty-eight psalms that make mention of God's judgments, thirty of them that promise God's judgments, thirty-six that pray for God's judgment, and twenty-nine that praise and worship God for His righteous judgments.

And so here's the quandary for the believer that I left you with last week. How do we deal with this? How do we reconcile these passages with passages that command us to love our enemies, to be gracious, to be tender-hearted and kind and good, to not return evil for evil, and to be loving and kind to our neighbor? Should we ever pray this way? Is it appropriate to pray this way? And if so, when? Can we pray this way? And how do we interpret these psalms and how do we apply their example?

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So, I'm going to give you three interpretive approaches to the Psalms that we can identify, I think, as you kind of look at how people wrestle through these issues. Three of them. And I'm going to critique and evaluate each one theologically. The first one is what is called the sub-Christian view. Now don't get lost in this quote. We're going to read it here together in just a moment, but listen to me as I describe this. This is the view that the passages that we are reading and have read over the course of the last few weeks reflect a lower standard of ethics than that which was espoused by Christ. That is, that the Old Testament has a more benighted approach to truth and emotion and evil than Christ gave us, therefore the Psalms are sub-Christian. They're less than Christian. Jesus came into the world and He gave us a new ethic. We're now to love one another and to serve one another and to forgive one another. And that's not what the Old Testament expects us to do. So the ethics of the Old Testament were kind of lowbrow, tribalistic, patriarchal, ancient, archaic ethics that might have characterized some nomadic wandering tribe of Jews who had spent four hundred years in slavery in Egypt, but we now have a new ethic, a new morality, and new expectations with Christ, who has given us a far better ethic than that which is given in the Old Testament. The Old Testament authors didn't know any better. They wrote what we might expect them to write since they were a warring and vengeful and brutal and violent group of unenlightened, benighted people. Got it? That's the sub-Christian view.

Or as Donald Fraser said in 1873,

At the same time, these passages cannot be fully accounted for without a frank recognition of the fact that the Psalter was conceived and written under the old covenant. That dispensation was more stern than ours. God's people had with all other peoples a conflict with sword and spear. They wanted to tread down their enemies, to crush the heathen, and thought it a grand religious triumph for a righteous man to wash his feet in the blood of the wicked (Ps. 58:10, Ps. 68:23). Now the struggle is without carnal weapons and the tone of the dispensation has changed.

He is expressing there the pre-Christian, sub-Christian ethic view of those Psalms. That was the old dispensation. They thought it was great to wash their feet in the blood of their enemies. We're now under the new covenant, new dispensation. Now we're supposed to forgive our enemies. Jesus has come along to tell us that they got it all wrong in the old covenant.

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Here's the examples that he cited there. Psalm 58:10: "The righteous will rejoice when he sees the vengeance; he will wash his feet in the blood of the wicked." Psalm 68:22–23: "The Lord said, 'I will bring them back from Bashan. I will bring them back from the depths of the sea; that your foot may shatter them in blood, the tongue of your dogs may have its portion from your enemies.'"

So this view says that we know better than the Old Testament authors knew. Later revelation—that is, New Testament revelation—corrects the Old Testament revelation. Now we know, because Jesus has revealed this, now we know what we should reject from the Old Testament because He has given us a better ethic. So any ethic that doesn't comport with our better ethic should be rejected. And of course you can see what that trajectory of thought will give you. Eventually you begin to take that same hermeneutical approach and say, "Well, under the old covenant, men were leaders and women were submissive. Under the old covenant, they stoned homosexuals and were against different types of sexual activity. Under the new covenant, we have something better. We have a higher ethic, a better ethic." That's where this hermeneutical trajectory would take us.

So here's my critique of that. First, the Old Testament did not teach a contrary ethic. Leviticus 19:18: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." Proverbs 20:22: "Do not say, 'I will repay evil'; wait for the Lord, and He will save you." Proverbs 24:29: "Do not say, 'Thus I shall do to him as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work.'" And if you're familiar with your Old Testament, you know that this ethic is all the way through the Old Testament. It's nothing new. The Old Testament did not teach a different ethic. Jesus didn't have to come and say, "OK, all that stuff that you saw under the old covenant and the Old Testament, anything that makes you feel uncomfortable or hurts you in the feels, just kind of get rid of that, and I'm here to tell you about something entirely new. This is a whole new thing that we got going on now, and now I'm going to elevate the ethical standards of God's people." That was not the approach of Jesus.

The Old Testament deals with how we should treat the foreigner and the alien and our brother and our kinsmen. The Old Testament teaches that people are created in the image of God and that they are valuable and gives us expectations of kindness and forgiveness and gentleness. All of those are revealed in the old covenant. You say, "But

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there's also these desires for God's enemies to be judged, right?" Yeah, both of those things are together in the old covenant, in the Old Testament.

Second point, the New Testament ethics rest on Old Testament teaching. This is important to remember. Not only does the Old Testament teach the same ethical standards and behavior as the New Testament does, but the New Testament ethics rest upon Old Testament teaching. You never get the sense when reading the New Testament that it was intended or written to overturn the Old Testament understanding of ethics and morals. The New Testament ethic does not supplant the Old Testament ethic, and the New Testament teaching is not there to correct Old Testament teaching. Romans 12:17–19: “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, [and now he quotes the Old Testament] ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.” So, notice that New Testament commands, ethical commands, are grounded in Old Testament teaching. The authors of the New Testament pointed back to the Old Testament. That is a quotation from Deuteronomy 32:35: “Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, in due time their foot will slip; for the day of their calamity is near, and the impending things are hastening upon them.” So Paul doesn't suggest that God's wrath will never be expressed or that God has changed His ethical or moral standards when he's quoting the Old Testament. He doesn't suggest that vengeance by God is not a good thing or a holy thing or a righteous thing. He is just saying in Romans 12 it is not up to us to be the executioners of that vengeance. Do you see what he said? What I'm saying? He's not saying that that is a bad desire to have, but he is saying that as God's people, we leave that into the hand of God. He will bring about vengeance. And we may cry for it and desire it and long for it and praise God when it comes, but it's not ours to execute. That belongs to God. That's in the hand of God.

If it is not sinful for God to judge the wicked, then how can it be sinful for us to desire God to judge the wicked? Is it sinful for God to judge the wicked? Is that sinful? It's not sinful. So if it's not sinful for God to execute judgment on the wicked, why is it sinful for a righteous person to desire God to execute justice on the wicked? That can't be a sinful desire. It can't be a sinful desire for me as one of His children to desire and ask God to do what He has promised to do. He has promised to execute judgment upon His enemies. And therefore, if that is a good and righteous thing for Him to do—a good and righteous God to do—then how can it be sinful for me to desire God to do what God has promised to do, which thing is a good and righteous thing for Him to do? It therefore

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cannot be a sinful thing to desire God to execute judgment upon His enemies when that's the very thing that He has said He will do, and He will do it in justice and righteousness, and it won't be sinful, and it will be a good thing for Him to do it when He does it.

Third, my third critique is that Jesus cited the Old Testament for His ethics. So far from this blasphemous nonsense that Jesus came and gave us a higher standard than the old covenant gave, Jesus in fact cited the Old Testament for His own ethics. Matthew 22:34–40:

34 But when the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered themselves together.

35 One of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him,

36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?”

37 And He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’

38 This is the great and foremost commandment.

39 The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

40 On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.”
(NASB)

Did Jesus step onto the scene and say, “Look, you've never ever ever heard anything like this; I know this is going to take you by surprise, but love your neighbor as yourself. Love God primarily, and then love your neighbor as yourself”? Jesus didn't say that. So what's the greatest commandment? He pointed to these two. Oh, by the way, He says, this is the old covenant, this is the Old Testament expectation. Love your neighbor as yourself. Apparently, there's no contradiction between loving your neighbor as yourself and desiring God to execute judgment upon the wicked. Jesus hinged His ethic of loving others on the whole law and the prophets. That is not a new ethic. He cited the Old Testament. His ethic was an Old Testament ethic. Jesus doesn't suggest something new, something better, something higher, and He didn't contradict the Old Testament perspective on justice.

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Fourth, the New Testament authors never suggest that their ethic is superior to the Old Testament ethic. We're running out of time already, but Romans 13—you can see there that Paul quotes the Old Testament for his commandment to

8 owe nothing to anyone except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law.

9 For this, 'You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, it is summed up in this saying, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Rom. 13:8–9 NASB)

So Paul quotes the Old Testament as basically the foundation for his ethic. He never suggests that Jesus came and gave us something new, something different, something revolutionary, something that supplanted the Old Testament. You see it also in Galatians 5:14: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." James 2:8: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." New Testament ethic is founded upon Old Testament ethics.

Five, this is a misunderstanding of the nature of revelation. Newer revelation does not contradict nor does it supplant or replace older revelation. This is very important to remember, and you have to get this inside of your hermeneutical gridwork, your frame of understanding, interpreting scripture. Newer revelation does not overturn older revelation. So God promised a King and a kingdom and a Davidic king to sit on David's throne, but He'll come along and say, "Well, that's old covenant. Jesus came along and now He was rejected, so all the new stuff, that just means that we have to reinterpret the old stuff and overturn that." No, newer revelation does not overturn or overthrow or cast out older revelation. Newer revelation interprets and applies and explains so that we can understand what the Old Testament revelation was, but the revelation and the truth is the same all the way through. It's just that newer revelation adds understanding and light to that older revelation, but it does not supplant it. It does not throw it out.

Number six, this is incompatible with a high view of Scripture, and I think you're probably already seeing that. Are the Old Testament imprecatory passages inspired? Were they written by the Holy Spirit? I believe that they were. Are they therefore inerrant—that is, without error? Are they therefore infallible, those authors? Therefore unable to fail or to err? They were. So the minute you say they didn't understand the things that we understand and then they wrote those things down, but now we have a better ethic and now we need to reinterpret this—the minute you say that, you place

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yourself in a position of judging what Old Testament writers said and reinterpreting that and casting blame upon them and suggesting that what they had and what they understood under the old covenant was not true.

If we say that they tried to write down truth but that they got it wrong, then God cannot accurately communicate to Old Testament saints. And then we have to say that human error and limitations and culture affected that old revelation negatively. And if that's true, then who's to say that the New Testament authors got it right? If the Old Testament authors got it wrong, who's to say the New Testament authors got it right? And if that's the way that it goes, that truth like that changes over time—so they got it wrong, the New Testament authors had it right, but now today we have it right—er—then we can just reinterpret what the New Testament authors wrote, right? That's the trajectory. If God disapproved of these words in the old covenant in the Psalms, then why didn't He ever correct that? And why didn't He prevent it from being recorded?

And the seventh critique is that this is not the view of Scripture that's modeled by Jesus and the apostles. And I'll have more to say about that under option number two. But here's option number two. The imprecations in Scripture—and by the way, is there any question about that or observation about that one, that first interpretive approach, the sub-Christian ethic approach to the Psalms? Nope? All right.

Option two, the imprecations that we find in the Psalms are indicative and not imperative. I need to unpack this a little bit. They're indicative and not imperative. Indicative meaning that they indicate something that is true or describe something that is true, but they're not imperative in the sense of asking or requesting or demanding that God do something. In other words, indicative just means that they are expressing how somebody feels and not necessarily how God would view it. Thus, the imprecatory psalms are merely stating what would happen to the wicked (indicative)—they're indicating what would happen to the wicked. and they're not actually requesting or commanding the destruction of the wicked. That's an imperative aspect. So they're indicative, not imperative. They're just observing what's going to happen, not asking that it does happen.

Here's my critique. Number one, this doesn't adequately explain what we actually see when we read the imprecatory psalms. We don't just read descriptions of God's judgments. We do actually read requests for God to judge the wicked. Psalm 109:6–15:

6 Appoint a wicked man over him, and let an accuser stand at his right hand.

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7 When he is judged, let him come forth guilty, and let his prayer become sin.

8 Let his days be few; let another take his office.

9 Let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow.

10 Let his children wander about and beg; and let them seek sustenance far from their ruined homes.

11 Let the creditor seize all that he has, and let strangers plunder the product of his labor.

12 Let there be none to extend lovingkindness to him, nor any to be gracious to his fatherless children.

13 Let his posterity be cut off; in a following generation let their name be blotted out.

14 Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord, and do not let the sin of his mother be blotted out.

15 Let them be before the Lord continually, that He may cut off their memory from the earth. (NASB)

Does that sound like the author is describing something that is going to be true or is true, or does it sound like the author is asking that these things be true? He's asking that these things be true.

Psalm 59:5: "You, O Lord God of hosts, the God of Israel, awake to punish all the nations; do not be gracious to any who are treacherous in iniquity." Verse 11 of the same psalm:

11 Do not slay them, or my people will forget; scatter them by Your power, and bring them down, O Lord, our shield.

12 On account of the sin of their mouth and the words of their lips, let them even be caught in their pride, and on account of curses and lies which they utter.

13 Destroy them in wrath, destroy them that they may be no more; that men may know that God rules in Jacob to the ends of the earth. Selah. (Ps. 59:11–13 NASB)

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In other words, after praising God for what he's asking God to do, he just says, "Now just meditate upon this and just glory in it." It's kind of tough, isn't it? Does it sound like the authors are just talking about what God is going to do, or does it sound like the authors are asking God to do what He has promised to do? Asking. They're asking.

Second critique is that there are a large number of such requests. Like if we only had to deal with one or two psalms where there was—like the two that I've just given to you here—if that's all we had, we might kind of dismiss it a little bit by saying, "Well, I mean, he's really just sort of describing what's going to happen and not really asking God to do the thing that's going to happen." But we don't have just a few of those. We have thirty-six psalms that pray for God to judge the wicked, and we have twenty-nine psalms that praise God for His judgment on the wicked.

Third, there are descriptions of God's judgments in Scripture. "He overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, for His lovingkindness is everlasting" (Ps. 136:15). Psalm 105:

27 They performed His wondrous acts among them, and miracles in the land of Ham.

28 He sent darkness and made it dark; and they did not rebel against His words.

29 He turned their waters into blood and caused their fish to die.

30 Their land swarmed with frogs even in the chambers of their kings.

31 He spoke, and there came a swarm of flies and gnats in all their territory.

32 He gave them hail for rain, and flaming fire in their land.

33 He struck down their vines also and their fig trees, and shattered the trees of their territory.

34 He spoke, and locusts came, and young locusts, even without number,

35 and ate up all vegetation in their land, and ate up the fruit of their ground.

36 He also struck down all the firstborn in their land, the first fruits of all their vigor. (Ps. 105:27–36 NASB)

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What's the author describing there? The Exodus and the judgments of God upon Egypt at the Exodus. Now what you just read there is a description of what God does and what God did. Right? So we can recognize what is a description, but then when he says, "O Lord, please judge the wicked and pour out Your wrath upon them and let them not be remembered or their sin be blotted out, and destroy them forever and scatter them so that Your people may know," that's not a description of what God is going to do, though God is going to do that. But it is actually a prayer and a request that God do that very thing.

Fourth, these are prayers of praise and worship in the Psalms. The prayers contain requests. They ask God for a judgment.

Number five, it is an abuse of the text to ignore the plain meaning of the words. We have mentions of God's judgments in Scripture, yes. And we also have requests of God's judgments in Scripture. So let's not take the request and just say, "Well, these are just merely descriptions." They're not. They're actually requests. They're prayers for God to do this very thing.

All right. Any question about that option before we move on to the third option? Third, the third bad interpretive approach—that these psalms express honest feelings but without any divine sanction of them. That these psalms honestly express, this is one way of viewing it, that these psalms honestly express the feelings of the people who are writing them, but God does not necessarily sanction those feelings. In other words, God has withheld His judgment as to whether those feelings are good or bad, all we can say is it's just really in angst and they just sort of express this desire for God to judge. But we don't really know how God feels about that. The psalmists are honestly distraught over the wicked. They are in anguish. They are in distress. They do desire judgment to fall. They want the wicked to be destroyed and to perish, even individual people and even by specific means, which we have seen them ask for specific judgments in these psalms. And these imprecations express how they felt, but they don't express God's approval of how they felt. In other words, what the psalmists say may have been sinful feelings and sinful desires and sinful requests, and we would have to understand them as sinful desires and sinful feelings and sinful requests.

I mean, honestly, have you ever had a desire, a strong desire, or requested God to do something that was sinful? We probably all have had sinful desires, even very strong desires. And so if we express those desires, we express those desires without God necessarily sanctioning or condoning the desire as it is expressed, and that's what they

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would say that the imprecatory psalms are. This is just the psalmist, this is just David being raw and real and authentic. Just keeping it real, bro. Just being honest with himself, sharing his lived experience. That's what he's doing. Not necessarily God condoning those feelings and those requests, but this is how David would have expressed them. And so this interpretive approach says these may even be sinful desires that are expressed, and these may even be sinful prayers as they were expressed. I hope you're seeing already some problems with that if you have a high view of Scripture.

So here's my critique. Number one, this makes the Psalms out to be just a lot of sinful venting, a lot of sinful venting, which turns out to be a divinely inspired book of worship. But it's sinful venting? That's how we're to understand the Psalms? This is just David going off some night? His enemies were having a heyday out there, and he just got really frustrated and he just vented out on a piece of paper and, "That's a good hymn; we'll sing that next week in the tabernacle." And then he writes that down and he's good with that. Is that how we're to understand the Psalms? I mean two-thirds of the Psalms have imprecatory elements in them. That's a lot of sinful venting, is it not?

Second critique, is asking a righteous God to do a righteous thing sinful wishcasting? Again, we come back to something I mentioned earlier. Is it unrighteous or sinful for me to desire a righteous God to do what that righteous God has promised to do in righteousness? I don't think that that desire is sinful. This is hard for us to get our minds around I think partly because we are sinful creatures and our sin is inside of our motives and our hearts and our desires and sometimes it's difficult to really examine where our hearts are at and say, "What am I desiring God to do in this and why do I want God to do that?" It is possible that my desire for God to do a righteous thing upon somebody specifically, it's possible that that may in fact be a sinful desire if my motive is wrong in that and what I'm wanting God to do and why I want Him to do it is wrong in that. But again, it's something in me that makes that sinful, not necessarily God doing that thing. Is it sinful to desire God's justice to be vindicated, to ask Him to do what He has promised to do? Is it sinful to want to see God's enemies vanquished and to see innocent people protected and to see evil stopped? Are those sinful desires? I don't think those are sinful desires. I see something sinful or evil in the news or going on in our nation and I want it to end. And I want it to end today. I want it to end right now. And honestly, my desire is so passionate against some of that evil that if it means the destruction of individual people and the pouring out of God's wrath upon them to end that evil, I'm fine with that. I think that that is a righteous desire.

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Now if it's my personal enemy who cut me off or built his fence on my property line or whatever it is, then that can be sinful. My neighbor is also a liar and a thief and he's cheating other people, and so I want God to pour out His wrath upon them, not because of what he did to me. Meanwhile, in the back of my mind is I lost two feet of property line because he built his fence over there, and so if He got him, then he'd get what he deserved for me, but it's really the other guy that I'm more concerned about. See, our desires and our ambitions and our motives can all play into that and corrupt that, but I'm trying to make the case to you that these desires that are expressed in the Psalms are not in and of themselves sinful.

Psalm 149:5–9:

5 Let the godly ones exult in glory; let them sing for joy on their beds.

6 Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their hand,

7 to execute vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples,

8 to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with fetters of iron,

9 to execute on them the judgment written. This is an honor for all His godly ones. Praise the Lord! (NASB)

An honor. This is an honor for all His godly ones. When Christ returns with angels in flaming fire to execute vengeance upon His enemies (2 Thess. 1), when that happens and the righteous saints come back, they are going to be the instruments through which God judges the nations and destroys the kingdoms and His enemies in this world. And that will be our honor. That will be the honor of the righteous on that day when that happens.

So, does this sound like impure motives, what you just read here in this psalm? Does this sound like something that God cannot condone? The fact is, and here's my third critique, God does condone judging His adversaries and His enemies. He is going to do it and He is all about it. He's not going to do it reluctantly, He's not going to do it, you know, "This is a sinful thing, but I got to do this in order to wrap this whole clambake up. I just have to figure out how to sort of get past this. It's sort of an ugly epoch in human history." God is not going to judge His enemies reluctantly. He's going to judge them because this is what they deserve. And when the day of grace runs out and there's no

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more grace and there's no more clemency and there's no more opportunity for repentance, He is not going to come back with His sword reluctantly or hesitatingly to execute that judgment. He is going to come back in the full fury of His wrath, all of it deserved, and He is going to destroy His enemies. That is what is going to happen. He is not coming back meek and mild in the manger.

Fourth critique is that there is no correction for these sentiments in Scripture, and this I think is a powerful one. We might expect in some of these psalms, after the psalmist sort of vents his anger and frustration and desires for God to judge the wicked, that you might have at the end of one of those psalms sort of a, "Lord, I know that that wasn't good. Just forgive me for what I just said. I mean, I called for judgment upon so and so, but that was just a horrible thing. I shouldn't have thought that, shouldn't have believed that." No, in fact, you find the opposite. You find these desires being expressed and these prayers being uttered and then the psalmist rejoicing and praising God for the fact that He is going to answer these prayers. You do not find psalmists correcting their previous expressions. Like, for instance, finding in verses 1–3 asking for God's judgment and then verses 4–5 confessing that sinful thought.

In fact, you don't have—the kind of self-correction that you have in the Psalms is like what you find in Psalm 73 where the author is in angst over the prosperity of the wicked and he wants God to judge this. It seems as if the righteous are sort of slighted and the wicked get all of the good things and the blessings, as if God's blessings are poured out on the wicked. But then the correction that the psalmist receives is when he walks into the sanctuary of God; then he says, "Then I perceive their end. Ah, He has lifted them up in a high place so that He may crush them down and destroy them permanently. This prosperity that they enjoy is not real and true prosperity. The prosperity that we get to enjoy as the righteous is eternal life in the land with the Lord. The Lord is our prosperity. This other stuff, the silver and the gold, it all melts away. It goes away. God is going to judge them." The correction that you see in these psalms that deal with God judging the wicked is the psalmist bringing their own hearts into conformity with God's righteous judgments and then rejoicing in the fact that those judgments will be poured out. But you don't see them in angst over the wicked, desiring their judgment, and then saying, "Oh Lord, forgive me for that. That was a wrong and sinful desire." They never repent over their imprecatory prayers. They never confess the evil of their desires or their sinful thoughts. They don't turn from them and ask God to give them instead a heart of love and compassion. They don't ask God to correct or reprove those expressions.

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In fact, and this is number five, the inspired writers seemed completely unaware that their imprecations were sinful. Psalm 139:

17 How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

18 If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand. When I awake, I am still with You.

19 O that You would slay the wicked, O God; depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed.

20 For they speak against You wickedly, and Your enemies take Your name in vain.

21 Do I not hate those who hate You, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?

22 I hate them with the utmost hatred; they have become my enemies.

23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts;

24 and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.
(Ps. 139:17–24 NASB)

He's asking God to search his heart, but the psalmist after this doesn't say, "All right, the Lord searched my heart, and all that stuff that I just said about the wicked, I need to repent of that." He doesn't do that. The writers of the imprecatory psalms seem completely oblivious to our notion that they were sinful when they wrote those psalms, because they weren't. He doesn't see anything of what he said there as hurtful or as sinful, and he doesn't see anything that he expressed there as incompatible with the everlasting way. So again, how should we regard these feelings as sinful or as unrighteous when Scripture does not say that they are? And notice what the psalmist says there. "They speak against You wickedly, and Your enemies take Your name in vain" (v. 20). "I hate them with the utmost hatred" (v. 22). So is this a contradiction of the other passage that we looked at earlier, which said we are to love our neighbor as ourself? Is this contradictory, or can these two things go together?

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And again, I would suggest to you something that I said a couple weeks ago. Remember that when David is praying and expressing God's righteousness in the Psalms, he is speaking on behalf of that Davidic King who was mentioned at the doorpost of the Psalter, Psalm 1 and Psalm 2, the blessed man who always does the will of God and that King who is coming that Psalm 2 says you do homage to Him or you will perish in the way. For the rest of the Psalter, remember David, as sort of the prototype of that coming King, the ancestor of that coming King, is often speaking on behalf of that coming King toward His enemies. And I think you have something going on there in this passage as well. There is a very real sense in which God hates His enemies. There's a very real sense in which God loves His enemies in a way that you and I cannot possibly understand. But it is also true that God has that type of perfect hatred for those who would treat His people and treat His King the way that they do, their enemies. That can exist within the character, the nature, and the heart of God at the very same time, those two sentiments, that there is a burning detesting of His enemies and there is yet a love for them as His creatures as well. And God will judge those whom He loves and those whom He hates. And so when you see this righteous expression of this indignation over sin and them taking God's name in vain and attacking God's people, we have to understand that in terms of this is the coming Messiah-King who is going to destroy His enemies and do everything that God has promised to do in terms of judging those enemies.

So these are only some of the inadequate interpretive approaches, and I have not given you the answer to them yet, but I simply raised three interpretations of the Psalms or way of approaching the imprecatory psalms that I don't think do justice to what we read or do justice to a high view of Scripture. So I'm actually—we're done about five minutes early if you have any questions or things that you want to discuss or express about these. We've kind of gone through the three interpretations. Any observations or questions about them?

Go ahead. [*someone asks a question*] Would it be sinful to ask God to strike Chuck Schumer down for what he has recently done to Israel? We are to pray for him, yes. And we can pray for God to execute His justice and pray for God to deliver people from their sin and bring them. . . There's two ways that evil—let me answer the question this way. There's two ways that evil can stop. Either the person who does it gets redeemed and saved, or the person who is committing that evil is made to stop because of something that God does. So I have prayed in the past when I see something that is horribly evil, I have prayed, “Lord, bring them to saving faith in Your Son so that this evil may cease.

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And if You will not do this, then stop the evil by judging those who do it so that people may fear. But as long as this wickedness ends, whatever it takes.” I think that that's an appropriate prayer. I think that that expresses the sentiment behind the Psalms, and even when the evil is done by somebody whom we love and know personally. I want this to stop. So destroy this person's pride, crush them, afflict them, cause them suffering, turn their heart to You, whatever You need to do to bring them to an end in themselves and stop their rebellion. Do that toward their salvation. Ultimately I want their salvation because that would stop the evil. But if that is not going to happen, then I want God's righteous judgments to be executed. I want pedophiles and rapists and murderers and thieves and persecutors of the church and wicked rulers and those who exploit the poor and abortionists and the homosexual agenda and the transgender movement—I want all of it to stop. This is destroying people. It's destroying the culture, it's destroying nations. It's ruining people. It's sending people to Hell. It is causing untold and unfathomable suffering. So how do you pray about that? What's the righteous way to pray about that? And you see the church being persecuted. I pray that God would save those persecutors and bring them to salvation, and if not, then judge them, even if it means ending their life and killing them so that this will stop, that this will cease.

[*someone comments*] Yeah, very good observation. Yeah, great observation. I'll say it for the recording. You do see in Scripture sinful men praying sinful things or asking for things or saying things that are false, but then either they correct that themselves or God corrects them. So David will express sometimes his angst or his down—his discouragement. Psalm 22 is a great example of this: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” (v. 1) God hadn't forsaken him, right? Later on in the psalm, I think it's verse 24—Thou hast not forsaken the afflicted man. So he expresses a prayer that is untrue, but then later on in the psalm, he has to correct that and speak truth to his heart to inform what he earlier said, which was not a true sentiment. It was really how David felt, but that feeling was not in accordance with reality. Thou hast not abandoned the afflicted. You have not turned Your back on the one who was afflicted. That was the truth. So, you do see Scripture writers expressing their sentiment, but then shedding truth upon, the light of truth upon that sentiment and correcting it later on. That's a good observation.

But you don't see that with the imprecatory psalms, right? You don't see that with the imprecatory psalms. God, I want You to judge. I want Your name to be vindicated. I want truth to be known. I want wickedness to stop. I want You to do what a righteous God should do to the unrighteous. And then there's no correction for that. You see it in the

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book of Habakkuk. Here's another example of imprecation. By the way, the imprecations are all the way through the Old Testament prophets, minor prophets and major prophets as well. In the book of Habakkuk, you have Habakkuk lamenting what's going on in Israel.

“Lord, look, justice is not done, and the widows are neglected and the orphans, and the rulers rule over us with wickedness, and the king is doing this, and all this horrible stuff is going on. Lord, aren't You going to do something? Aren't You going to judge this? Your eyes are too pure to look upon unrighteousness.” And then God says, “Oh, I got it. Don't worry about it. Just be patient. Judgment's coming. The Babylonians, I have them coming in. They're going to destroy your people.” And then Habakkuk says, “But they're more wicked than we are. How can You use a wicked people to judge our people when our people are more righteous than the Babylonians?” And the answer to Habakkuk's lament is just that God is going to do what He's going to do among the nations. Yes, He's going to judge Israel, but Babylon had it coming as well. The Medes and the Persians came in, destroyed the Babylonians, and judged that nation. So this desire or this longing for God to judge people and to judge sin is the premise of all of the Old Testament prophets. There is the longing and desire by the righteous to see God's name be vindicated and to see judgment executed upon His enemies. It's a righteous judgment.

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