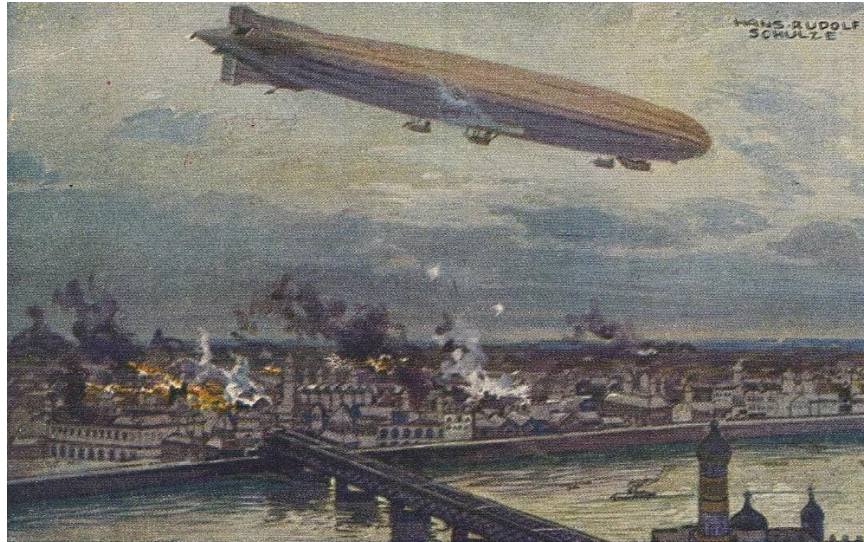


# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Should Christians Pray the “Vengeance Psalms”?

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While German bombers raided southern England, the Church of England raided Psalm 58.<sup>1</sup>

In early July of 1917, the Lower House of the Canterbury Convocation passed liturgical reform to update the church’s psalter, and that update excised from the psalter several individual verses calling for God’s judgment on the wicked, and the one psalm to be removed entirely was Psalm 58. This edit came just days after German Gotha planes had killed hundreds, including women and children, in London and the southeast of England. The bishops headed off the use of these psalms as reprisal refrains against the Germans by removing them from the psalter. Among the prayers removed were “O God, break the teeth in their mouths” ([Ps 58:6](#)<sup>L</sup>) and “Let them be like the snail that dissolves into slime, like the stillborn child that never sees the sun” ([Ps 58:8](#)).

In justification of this psalter edit, one writer said that these imprecatory psalms include, “wild screams of barbaric rage in which reason, morality, respect for humanity and reverence for God seem alike forgotten.” The psalms were regarded as “unchristian,”

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/jbr-2017-0008/html?lang=en>

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unfit for the age of the gospel, an affront to the peace and love of the bleeding Savior, belonging to a time of primitive, warlike, and unrefined Jewish religion. They were “little short of an insult to the divine Majesty.”

The public reacted strongly. On July 6, 1917, one London paper’s front-page banner headline read, “Ban on Reprisal Psalms: David’s Wicked Ideas of Vengeance.” One columnist wrote that the Church of England, “revenges itself upon the Psalmist, and would forbid us to read in our churches the minatory poem, which has stirred the blood of many generations of stalwart men.” Another, not mincing words, called this action the “nambypambyism of the Bishops,” whom another called, “those mollycoddling ecclesiastics.” One column boldly stated, “It will be a bad day for England and for democratic civilization when the righteous shall not rejoice when he seeth the vengeance.”

Despite the public backlash, the bishops would not be moved, and the imprecatory prayers remained exiled from the psalter. Apparently, Psalm 58 was too violent for World War I.

How about you? Would you pray Psalm 58? Would you sing Psalm 58? Would you even agree with Psalm 58?

Let me broaden the question: Should Christians pray the imprecatory psalms today? Should they be sung in churches today? Should Christians pray for judgment on the wicked?

When you see injustice, unrighteousness, and wickedness threatening image-bearers across this globe, when you see hands dealing out wrongful violence to the innocent, when you see (let me make it more concrete) our own country engaged in the [legalized genocide of 63 million unborn babies](#) through abortion, [52,000 Nigerian Christians slaughtered in darkness](#) by Boko Haram in this century alone, and the Hamas terrorists’ public celebration of the rape of Israeli women [while their babies are cooked alive in an oven](#)... can you pray Psalm 58?

Now we need to be careful. There are some throughout church history who have paraded the imprecations of the psalter as a machismo cover for their petty vindictiveness, their puerile hatred, and their sinful bloodlust. The words of our holy God may never be a servant of sin.

But just as often, and perhaps more often, the church has spurned the blood-stained pages (as did C. S. Lewis) as “devilish,” “diabolical,” “and naive.” Lewis went on to write, “It is monstrously simple-minded to read the cursings in the Psalms with no feeling except

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one of horror at the uncharity of the poets." Another author calls the imprecatory psalms "the undisguised gloating and the cruel vindictiveness of an intolerant religious fanaticism."

My sense, as I hear Christians talk, is that most wouldn't err in either of those directions but would in another. They would ignore an imprecatory psalm altogether. Avoid it in polite company. Never invite it over to dinner. Keep it locked in the theological basement away from the kids, sparing themselves from social embarrassment because of its strong, violent language. In fact, that's exactly what whole swathes of Christendom have done today. The RCC Liturgy of the Hours removed Psalm 58, as has the United Methodist Hymnal, the Revised Common Lectionary, and the Episcopal Sunday Lectionary.

Ask yourself, when was the last time you heard someone pray like this? "O God, make those evil rulers like an aborted fetus!" That's [Psalm 58:8](#).

Can you pray Psalm 58? Or any of the so-called "vengeance psalms," the imprecatory psalms? Should Christians today be praying these bloody pages from the Old Testament?

Over a few posts, I intend to demonstrate that Christians may indeed pray the imprecatory psalms today and do so with love, compassion, and righteous indignation in their hearts. To get started, we need to do a brief survey of imprecations in the Bible.<sup>2</sup>

## Imprecation in the Bible

First, what is meant by the old-school word "imprecation?" Simply, an imprecation is *a prayer for God to judge the wicked*. And we see them all through the Scriptures, beginning in the Old Testament. For instance, we hear Moses pray to God for the destruction of Israel's enemies:

*And whenever the ark set out, Moses said, "Arise, O Lord, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you."*

[Numbers 10:35](#)

Another example of imprecation occurs after Joab murders Abner, prompting David to pray:

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<sup>2</sup> In doing so, I do not intend to produce a novel view. Several good works have been recently written on the topic of Christian ethics and the imprecatory psalms. In particular, Daniel Michael Nehrbass wrote a book entitled *Praying Curses* that speaks helpfully to this issue from a pastoral and homiletical perspective, and a recently published book by Trevor Laurence entitled *Cursing with God* provides a biblical theological rationale for Christian imprecation.

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*May it fall upon the head of Joab and upon all his father's house, and may the house of Joab never be without one who has a discharge or who is leprous or who holds a spindle or who falls by the sword or who lacks bread!*

[2 Samuel 3:29](#)

In response to plots made against Jeremiah, the prophet lifts his voice to God and says:

*Therefore deliver up their children to famine; give them over to the power of the sword; let their wives become childless and widowed. May their men meet death by pestilence, their youths be struck down by the sword in battle.*

[Jeremiah 18:21](#)

And Nehemiah likewise prays against the scheming of his enemies, Sanballat and Tobiah:

*Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. Do not cover their guilt, and let not their sin be blotted out from your sight, for they have provoked you to anger in the presence of the builders.*

[Nehemiah 4:4–5](#)

These are just a few examples of imprecation from the Old Testament. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we find these kinds of prayers for judgment employed with some frequency, and rarely with qualification or embarrassment.

The highest concentration of imprecatory prayers in the Old Testament is the book of Psalms. By my count, there are 40 sections of imprecation in the psalter.<sup>3</sup> <sup>3</sup> Depending on how you count it, there are between 12 and 18 “imprecatory psalms,” meaning psalms that are characterized by imprecation. Some psalms that often make that cut are Psalms 35, 58, 69, 83, 109, and 137. One section from Psalm 109 serves as an example:

*Appoint a wicked man against him; let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is tried, let him come forth guilty; let his prayer be counted as sin! May his days be few; may another take his office! May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow! May his children wander about and beg, seeking food far from the ruins they inhabit!*

[Psalm 109:6–10](#)

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<sup>3</sup> Psalms 3:7; 5:10; 7:6, 9; 9:19-20; 10:2, 12, 15; 11:6; 12:3-4; 17:13-14; 28:4; 31:17-18; 35:1–6, 8, 19, 23-26; 40:14-15; 41:10; 54:5; 55:9, 15; 56:7; 58:6-9; 59:5, 11-13; 68:30; 69:22-25, 27-28; 70:2-3; 71:13; 72:4, 9; 74:11, 22-23; 79:6, 10, 12; 80:16; 82:8; 83:9-18; 86:17; 94:1-2; 104:35; 109:6-15, 19-20, 29; 119:78; 129:5-8; 137:7-9; 139:19; 140:8-11; 141:10; 143:12; 144:6.

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Because of the prevalence of imprecation in the OT, one of the ways that Christians have sought to deal with the ethical dilemma presented by these prayers is to say something like, “That was just an Old Covenant habit. We are spiritual people now. Jesus taught us a better ethic when he said, ‘Bless those who persecute you’ and ‘love your enemies.’ Even Paul says, ‘Bless and do not curse.’”

However, that road runs out quickly, because we find that the New Testament likewise contains strong imprecations. For instance, Jesus pronounces “Woes” upon the Pharisees in Matthew 23 (which can be a form of imprecation), and in [Mark 11:14](#) he prays for judgment on a fig tree as a not-so-thinly-veiled prayer for judgment on the nation of Israel. He goes on to tell a parable about a widow who persistently begs an unrighteous judge for justice, and then our Lord explains:

*And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?*

[Luke 18:7–8](#)

Peter quotes an Old Testament imprecation in [Acts 1:20](#), and elsewhere says to the greedy Simon Magus:

*May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!*

[Acts 8:20](#)

Paul uses imprecations even more often. The apostle to the Gentiles quotes imprecations from Psalm 69 in [Romans 11:9–10](#). In [1 Corinthians 16:22](#), he says, “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed.” And in [Galatians 1:8–9](#), Paul strongly declares:

*But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.*

[Galatians 1:8–9](#)

The Bible even closes with a kind of imprecation heard from the souls of Christian martyrs in heaven:

*They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”*

[Revelation 6:10](#)

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From the example of Jesus and the apostles, then, I take it that Christians are not only permitted to pray imprecatory prayers today but that indeed we are expected to. And, given Paul's unqualified command to sing the psalms ([Eph 5:19](#), [Col 3:16](#)), it seems as though the church ought to be singing and praying the imprecatory psalms.

Undoubtedly, the concept of Christian imprecation raises all kinds of ethical questions. How does that work with the biblical command to love our enemies? Are these just prayers to stop evil or to destroy evil people? Are these prayers restricted to God's enemies? How does imprecation work with forgiveness?

These are important and weighty questions... which I will turn to in the next post. Stay tuned.



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