

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Objections to Praying the “Vengeance Psalms”

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[In a previous post](#), we surveyed the Scriptures to answer the question, “Should Christians pray the vengeance psalms?” The survey revealed that these prayers for judgment, which are also called “imprecations,” are not isolated to the Psalter but found throughout the Bible, even on the lips of Jesus himself. It seems, then, given the somewhat frequent appearance of imprecation throughout Scripture with positive portrayals, and the commands to sing the psalms in Paul’s letters to New Covenant churches, that there is at least some expectation that Christians would be praying for God’s justice today.

My guess, however, is that most of us haven’t heard imprecatory prayers uttered in the church. Usually, the reasoning goes something like, “That’s not how Jesus taught us to pray,” or “Aren’t we supposed to pray *for* our enemies, not *against* them?” Or, perhaps you’ve heard, “That was just an Old Testament thing, but we pray differently now.” These are understandable objections, to be sure.

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In order to answer these and other objections, and assert that imprecation is indeed appropriate for Christians today, I've grouped the objections into a handful of categories and will offer brief responses to each of them:

## **"Imprecation is sinful."**

It is certainly possible to pray an imprecatory prayer vindictively, spitefully, in sinful anger, or even sadistically. However, the inclusion of these prayers for judgment in inspired Scripture alongside statements of innocence indicates that it's possible to pray these prayers in a righteous, godly way.

Psalm 35 is a particularly striking portrait of David's clean conscience against the unprovoked malice of his enemies. David writes three times that his attackers are against him "without cause" ([Ps 35:7, 19](#)). He says that they "repay me evil for good," (35:12) and "are wrongfully my foes." He even goes so far as to describe his own kindness to these enemies when they were afflicted (35:13–14) and finishes the psalm by exclaiming, "Let those who delight in my righteousness shout for joy and be glad" (35:27). Though David is aware of his own sin and failure, he asserts that with respect to these aggressors, he is innocent and cries out for God to "Vindicate me" (35:24). And imprecatory prayers are strewn throughout this very psalm (35:3–6, 8, 19, 24–26).

Furthermore, multiple sinless figures in Scripture pray imprecatory prayers. Jesus himself, the sinless Son of God, used imprecation (Matthew 23; [Mark 11:14](#)). [Revelation 6:10](#) also records the sanctified souls of the martyrs in heaven praying imprecation on their earthbound enemies. As I understand it, heaven is a world without sin, and therefore the cry of these souls should not be regarded as sinful. The Bible does not present imprecatory prayers as sinful, even if they may sound harsh to our ears.

## **"Imprecation is absent in church history."**

This objection, while not an authoritative claim, would be a strong argument against the use of imprecatory prayers in the church if it were true. However, it is simply incorrect. Church history is replete with calls for God to bring justice for his people, particularly against false religions and false teachers.

A few examples will suffice. Imprecatory psalms have historically been included in the psalters of the church throughout history, including the Genevan Psalter. Miles Coverdale, of the Coverdale Bible, wrote an imprecatory hymn for the church entitled "Let Go the Whore of Babylon" based on Revelation 18–19. Martin Luther, in response to a papal bull excommunicating him from the Roman Catholic Church, wrote, "O Christ,

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my Lord, look down, let the Day of Thy judgment break and destroy the devil's nest at Rome!"

Several similar examples could be reproduced, but the point is made: imprecatory prayers have been used by Christians throughout church history.

## **"Imprecation belongs to the Old Covenant."**

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This objection may sound something like, "The Mosaic Covenant dealt with a geopolitical people of a tribal God and contained an inferior ethic than the universal inclusion of the New Covenant." This has already been proven false by citing several instances of imprecation in the New Testament, even falling from the lips of Jesus. The New Covenant apparently doesn't restrict the use of imprecation because that's how Paul, a New Covenant minister, prays on multiple occasions ([Rom 11:9-10](#); [1 Cor 16:22](#); [Gal 1:8-9](#)).

A form of this objection typically arises from those who would argue that the "God of the Old Testament" is a God of wrath, while the "God of the New Testament" is a God of love. Not only does this objection indicate an unfamiliarity with both testaments, but it strikes at the very character of God's revelation in redemptive history. Is God two gods? Did he change at some point? If there is indeed a different morality imposed on Old Covenant Israel than the New Covenant church, what does that say about the moral nature of the one God who is Lord over both? If God is the same and never changes, then this objection runs quickly into a theological dead end.

## **"Imprecation was only for inspired authors."**

This objection is a form of the argument that we should not take the imprecatory psalms to be *prescriptive* but merely *descriptive* of what these authors prayed in their circumstances, which they were privileged to do by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

First of all, I think that's a misunderstanding of how inspiration worked. For instance, that the author of [2 Samuel 3:29](#) records David praying for judgment on Joab does not mean that David's speech at that moment was inspired speech. [2 Samuel 3:29](#)'s record of David's speech is inspired, not the speech itself. So there was no supernatural privilege granted to David when he uttered that particular imprecatory prayer or other similar records of imprecation in the Bible.

In addition, imprecatory prayers cover the Psalter, which was the hymnbook of Israel. The point of the psalms was for them to be put in the mouths of average Israelites like a hymnal would work in a church today. And, if nothing else, we are commanded to

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imitate Jesus and Paul ([1 Cor 11:1<sup>L</sup>](#)), and they both prayed for God's judgment. So, the Bible does not seem to restrict imprecation to the inspired words of biblical authors.

## **“Imprecation contradicts the New Testament ethic of love.”**

This is the weightiest of these objections and the one that requires the most consideration. Usually, two verses are cited as a rejection of Christian imprecation:

*“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”*

[Matthew 5:44](#)

*“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”*

[Romans 12:14](#)

A handful of observations need to be made. First, the ethic of enemy love was commanded in the Old Testament as well ([Exod 23:4–5](#); [Prov 25:21–22](#); [Lev 19:18](#)). Jesus and Paul were not articulating a new system of morality for New Covenant believers, but echoing the ancient ethic that was championed in the Torah. God's morality didn't change from one covenant to the next, and neither should his people's.

Second, you should ask yourself, did Jesus love his enemies, the Pharisees? And was he willing to pronounce judgment on them, to pray imprecatory prayers against them? Apparently so. The reality is that there is a complexity in the heart of God that we would do well to mirror. I'm not arguing that praying for God to break in someone's teeth is an act of love towards them (as some have tried to argue), but rather that it is possible for God to so love the world and for people in that world to not believe and perish ([John 3:16](#)). And consider that David shared this same tension of emotions in [Psalm 109:4–6](#) “In return for my love they accuse me, but I give myself to prayer. So they reward me evil for good, and hatred for my love. Appoint a wicked man against him; let an accuser stand at his right hand.” According to this text, David is able to love his enemies *and* pray against them. The two are not identical but they are compatible.

With respect to [Romans 12:14](#), an imprecation is not, precisely, a curse, but *a prayer for God to curse*. This distinction may seem insignificant, but it's at the heart of the glory of the so-called “cursing psalms.” In the imprecatory psalms, the psalmists are entrusting judgment to God rather than taking it into their own hands. David was a man of war who knew how to take out his enemies. And yet he prayed for God to bring judgment rather than striking out on his own. This accords exactly with Paul's ethic in Romans 12, where he later writes, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God” ([Rom 12:19](#)).

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Now, there are still some questions we have not resolved regarding Christian imprecation. For instance, what kind of emotion would righteously motivate this kind of judgment prayer? What precisely should an imprecation be asking for? And what is the end goal of a “vengeance psalm” anyway? We will turn to those questions in the next post.



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