

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

# Principles for Praying the “Vengeance Psalms”

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In two previous posts, we showed [why Christians should pray imprecatory prayers](#) (after the manner of the “vengeance psalms”) and [answered the chief objections to Christian imprecation](#). In this final post, then, we need to establish biblical principles to keep in mind when praying to God for judgment.

Even though the Bible presents the “imprecatory psalms” as upright models for the prayers of the believing, imprecation is also fraught with spiritual dangers that we would be wise to guard against. In opening the door for prayers of judgment, we are certainly not advocating for divine assassination requests or vindictive, spiteful retribution demands. But we should be able to articulate what principles place those kinds of requests out of biblical bounds, and in contrast what a godly prayer for justice would sound like.

Here are three principles for praying imprecatory prayers that are essential to following the biblical model of the “vengeance psalms”:

## **The Anger Must Be Righteous**

Imprecatory prayers only make sense as the product of righteous anger. Anger, in essence, is a desire for the wrong to be made right, a desire for justice to be done. So, if you see a heinous evil, and you desire that God would judge it, that anger may compel

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you to pray to God for that judgment. However, for that prayer to be a righteous request, your motive must be righteous anger.

Typically, commentators who would advocate *for* the practice of imprecation today go on to say that we must not pray for judgment in *personal* matters. Like, if someone cuts you off pulling into the church parking lot and you throw up a quick, “May their engine explode!” Or if a hotel cancels your reservation because they double-booked, and you try to call down fire from heaven on them. This is precisely what the disciples tried to do to a Samaritan town in [Luke 9:51–56](#)<sup>L</sup> because the citizens wouldn’t let Jesus stay there. Jesus rebukes the disciples for even asking to pray that kind of prayer. And some commentators say that the fault of the disciples can be found in their seeking *personal* retribution, not *corporate* vindication of God’s people.

But the problem with those examples is not that the prayer is about a personal matter. In fact, most of the imprecatory psalms deal with instances of personal attacks. For instance, David prays for judgment against those who “hid their net for me” ([Ps 35:7](#)<sup>L</sup>), those who “lie in wait for my life” (59:3), and those who “[speak] against me with lying tongues” (109:2). So, the problem with the disciples’ request isn’t that the judgment they prayed for pertained to a personal matter—honestly, how would you even begin to parse out personal from impersonal? The problem was that the motive for the prayer was *unrighteous anger*.

The question then becomes: How can you tell the difference between righteous and unrighteous anger? First, anger can only be righteous if it is in response to actual unrighteousness. In the parable of the lost sons in Luke 15, the older son’s anger is unrighteous because he is mad about a good, godly thing, namely the compassion of the father. [Ezekiel 25:15–17](#) makes the issue even more clear by contrasting Philistia’s unrighteous vengeance with God’s righteous vengeance. Philistia’s vengeance is motivated by “malice of soul,” while God’s is provoked by their unrighteousness.

Second, anger can only be righteous if it is slow. God is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” ([Ex 34:6](#)). God is patient, long-suffering, and merciful towards sinners who deserve swift judgment. Likewise, our anger should be slow as well. We don’t want an itchy trigger finger with imprecation, but should seek alternatives first, when possible. We also might be wrong, so we should be careful of snap judgments.

Third, our anger (our desire for justice) is only ever righteous when we place the enacting of that justice into the hands of the Almighty Judge. Ask yourself, “Who holds the sword?” If you grab the sword from God’s hand and say, “I’ll take care of this my way,” that’s unrighteous anger. If you entrust the sword to the perfect will of God, and submissively pray for his justice, then that’s righteous anger. Notice that imprecations

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are prayers, not actions. They are a phone call to 911, not street justice. They trust God to do what is right.

## The Judgment Must Be Just

Another principle for praying imprecatory prayers would be that the actual request must align with God's just character. It wouldn't make sense to pray for anything contrary to the character of God. You shouldn't pray for an unjust judgment to a just Judge. For example, if the barista at Starbucks is lazy and makes your drink incorrectly, it would be unjust to pray for them to never see the light of day again. Proportionality matters to justice ([Deut 25:1-3](#)).

Knowing how to pray for justice means knowing how God defines justice throughout the Scriptures. What has God promised to do in response to wickedness in the world? God's commitment to judging the wicked begins in [Genesis 3:15](#), is narrowed in God's promise to Abraham in [Genesis 12:1-3](#), finds broader expression in the law of *lex talionis* ("eye for an eye," [Ex 21:23-25](#)), and receives specific articulation in the covenantal curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28. The principle of *lex talionis* shows up repeatedly in the imprecatory psalms for that reason. Here are two clear examples:

*"He loved to curse; let curses come upon him! He did not delight in blessing; may it be far from him! He clothed himself with cursing as his coat; may it soak into his body like water, like oil into his bones!"*

[Psalm 109:17-18](#)

*"And let the net that he hid ensnare him; let him fall into it—to his destruction!"*

[Psalm 35:8](#)

The fact that so much of the language of the imprecatory psalms sounds so harsh to us is in large part because, in the Western world, we are often sheltered from the equally heinous sin and violence that provokes the psalmists to pray. David's not asking for the death penalty for shoplifters. He's asking God to turn the sword of the wicked, which is stained with the blood of the innocent, back into their murderous hearts. He is praying for a just judgment.

## The Purpose Must Be Worship

The aim of all of life is the glory of God, and that includes an imprecatory prayer. Psalm 83 is an imprecatory prayer that well captures this ultimate goal:

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*“Fill their faces with shame, that they may seek your name, O LORD. Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever; let them perish in disgrace, that they may know that you alone, whose name is the LORD, are the Most High over all the earth.”*

[Psalm 83:16–18](#)

Notice in those verses that Asaph (the author of Psalm 83) prays for God to be glorified *either* through their conversion (“that they may seek your name”) or through their ultimate destruction (“let them perish in disgrace”). In both cases, however, Asaph prays that God would be glorified, “that they may know that you alone... are the Most High over all the earth.” Our imprecations should likewise reflect this complexity. We ought to pray for God to be glorified through both salvation and through judgment, for God to be magnified in his might and in his mercy. Our desire above all is for God to be seen for the glorious God that he is, and for all that he is forever.

Consider, too, that the only “hallelujah” in the NT falls in the context of rejoicing over God’s glory in judgment (as an answer to an imprecatory prayer!). After the destruction of Babylon, John hears the loud cries of a massive multitude,

*“Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just; for he has judged the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her immorality and has avenged on her the blood of his servants.”*

[Revelation 19:1–2](#)

If heaven glorifies God for judging justly, then it stands to reason that we may justly pray for that judgment to come. That’s what is bound up in the prayer that ends the Bible, “Amen. Come Lord Jesus!” ([Revelation 22:20](#)<sup>L</sup>). Our prayers should always be for the glory of God, whether through mercy or through judgment.

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I hope I’ve made the case briefly that the imprecatory psalms should indeed be in the psalter, and that they should be in *your* psalter as well. They should be in your heart, on your lips, and filling your prayers. To be sure, there are myriad ways to pray for vengeance wickedly, but the reality is that all of the Scripture can be perverted. The wrongful abuse of Scripture must not keep us from the righteous use of Scripture.

In a world filled with the persecution of the saints, the slaughter of the innocent, and the unjust oppression of the weak, we have ample cause as the people of God to pray for God’s justice to be done. May we lift our voices with godly motives to plead with God that he brings his kingdom of righteousness, that he spares unworthy sinners, and that

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he judges the wicked according to his good will. And may we pray it all for the glory of the God of justice through Jesus Christ.

(If you're wondering what an imprecatory prayer might sound like utilizing these principles, [here's one that I prayed after preaching on Psalm 58.](#))



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