

CRIES FOR JUSTICE

Introduction

I was visiting someone in the hospital and knowing their needs I chose to read Psalm 139. I wanted to encourage them that God had not forsaken them and His thoughts toward them were loving and good. I started at the beginning and then came to verse 17-18:

“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.” (Psalm 139:17–18, ESV)

What I hadn’t anticipated was the next verses. I kept reading:

“Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! They speak against you with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies.” (Psalm 139:19–22, ESV)

From great encouragement there was that sudden shift of anger, retribution – calling down God’s wrath on one’s enemies. I was uncomfortable in that hospital room; and many Christians are uncomfortable with these psalms. The reason I chose to teach on this topic because we cannot avoid reading these psalms that cry for vengeance and verses that call down “woes” and condemnation of God’s enemies. We need a means have handling these verses ethically and helpfully.

Another well-known psalm like this is Psalm 109. Let’s read it.

Imprecatory Prayers

In theology these psalms or parts of psalms are called *imprecatory*. Dr. Walter Kaiser teaches us that these prayers are “an invocation of judgment, calamity or curse against one’s enemies who are simultaneously enemies of God.”¹

I believe that these psalms and other places in the Bible that call for God’s justice are in perfect harmony with Christ’s teaching and example and are in perfect harmony with New Testament ethics. Let me restate the problem:

- a) **One the one side** you have a words like David: *“Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies”*; and,

¹ <https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ajet/vols/23-1.pdf>

- b) **On the other side** you have the words of Jesus: like “*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,”* (Matthew 5:43–44, ESV).

How can we harmonize those two seemingly contradictory statements? Well there are some viewpoints that I immediately dismiss. Of course some would say,

- a) This shows the errors in the Bible and proves it is not trustworthy.
- b) That it shows the unique difference in the Old Testament (a reflection of man’s ideas and an angry God) and the New Testament (God’s ideas and a God of love).
- c) That it is an inspired record of defective prayers and unsuited for the Church.
- d) That they are not really pleas for justice but predictions of future judgment.
- e) Or as C.S. Lewis thought – they are simply devilish.

But that is not true. When Paul considered the Old Testament, he wrote that “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*” (2 Timothy 3:16–17, ESV)

Why Does It Matter?

Why should it matter to you what you think of these imprecatory psalms, or these pleas for God’s justice to fall on men and women? Why should you even care? Let me give you 4 reasons:

- #1. Your view of these types of psalms will affect your view of the Bible.
- #2. Your view of these types of psalms will affect your view of God.
- #3. Your view of these types of psalms will affect your view of evangelism and witness.
- #4. Your view of these types of psalms will affect your devotional life.

The Interpretative Key

Two important truths that we need to assert as we wrestle with how to understand and apply these statements of wrath and judgment are:

- 1. The New Testament doesn’t correct the Old Testament; it clarifies it. The Old Testament clearly teaches love for one’s enemies. (E.g., Lev 19:17f, 33-34. Prov 24:16); and
- 2. The New Testament is full with prayers for justice and judgment on God’s enemies, including from the very mouth of our Savior. (E.g. Mat 23:13ff; 1Cor 16:22; Galatians; Rev 6:10, 19:1-6)

Here’s the point I wish for you to grasp: **The Old and New Testaments hold in tension the requirement to love the enemies of God and hate the enemies of God -- simultaneously.** This is not a tension that

cannot be resolved, but both statements are true and the same time. The late Dr. John Stott has helped us out a lot here when he writes,

“The truth is that evil men should be the object simultaneously of our ‘love’ and of our ‘hatred’, as they are simultaneously the objects of God’s² . . . to ‘love’ them is ardently to desire that they will repent and believe, and so be saved. To ‘hate’ them is to desire with equal ardour that, if they stubbornly refuse to repent and believe, they will incur God’s judgment.”³

I believe that the tension between loving the enemies of God and hating the enemies of God is found in the character of God Himself. For example:

- a. God’s motive is compassionate. *“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”* (2 Peter 3:9, ESV)
- b. God will always change from judgment to mercy if someone repents. *“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”* (Isaiah 55:7, ESV)
- c. God’s methodology is “. . . merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” (Psalm 86:15, ESV)
- d. God’s ultimate disposition is holiness. *“For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.”* (Psalm 5:4, ESV)

How To Pray For Christ’s Enemies.

Martin Luther was very helpful when he wrote that “We should pray that our enemies be converted and become our friends, and if not, that their doing and designing be bound to fail and have no success and that their persons perish rather than the Gospel and the kingdom of Christ.”⁴

So in practical terms what I am saying is that these types of psalms serve a profitable purpose, but we are not quickly called to pray down judgment upon the enemies of the Cross, but rather we are called to love and pray for them. However for those who have positioned themselves in public and persistent, in unrepentant and unapologetic hatred of Christ and the Gospel, the Bible does permit us to pray that God’s judgment will fall on them. But even then it has to be for the right motive. Notice Psalm 83:13–18 (ESV)

² *“For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you. The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man.”* (Psalm 5:4–6, ESV)

³ <https://truthwartoday.wordpress.com/2012/02/25/the-imprecatory-psalms-lectures/>

⁴ <http://www.the-highway.com/articleJune00.html>

¹³ O my God, make them like whirling dust, like chaff before the wind. ¹⁴ As fire consumes the forest, as the flame sets the mountains ablaze, ¹⁵ so may you pursue them with your tempest and terrify them with your hurricane! ¹⁶ Fill their faces with shame, **that they may seek your name, O LORD.** ¹⁷ Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever; let them perish in disgrace, ¹⁸ **that they may know that you alone, whose name is the LORD, are the Most High over all the earth.**

The psalmist calls upon the severity of God so that they would seek Him. But if they don't that ultimately God will be glorified.

Practical Application

So properly understanding and applying these psalms that call for God's judgment or the New Testament calls for condemnation of God's enemies, we should consider the following:

- A. Most of us already pray for the reward of the righteous and the condemnation of the wicked every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. For God's Kingdom to come means that sin and sinners will be vanquished.
- B. Every time we read a prayer calling for justice we should be reminded that our God is holy and He cannot forgive sin. He must punish sin. If our forgiveness is not found in the sacrifice of Christ for our sin, we will suffer the consequences ourselves.
- C. When we read psalms of imprecation or we read words like Paul wrote, "*If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come!*" (1 Corinthians 16:22, ESV) it should re-double our love, our praying and our witness to those who still hate the Lord.
- D. When we read such calls for judgment they should, as did David, call us to examine our own lives. Notice as we return to Psalm 139, we read:

"Oh that you would slay the wicked, O God! O men of blood, depart from me! They speak against you with malicious intent; your enemies take your name in vain. Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies." (Psalm 139:19–22, ESV)

And then right away David prays: "*Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!*" (Psalm 139:23–24, ESV)