

Psalm 54 (1 Samuel 26:1-12)

Imprecatory psalms are a challenging theme. They must be understood in context, and overall in meaning and approach. I have included a few resources here that I think could be helpful for the groups. 1. I have pasted a really good article by Adam J. Howel from *Bible Study Magazine* June 2021 on praying imprecatory psalms. I have used some of this material in the sermon. 2. Below is also a link to a very helpful map overview from Lifeway Bible Resources of 1 Samuel 19-23 on Saul's pursuit of David through the wilderness. I would suggest reading the sections pertaining to each map/slide together to gain a better context leading up to today's 1 Samuel 26 text and Psalm 54.

<https://etb-media.s3.amazonaws.com/explorethebible/files/2016/08/DavidFleesSaul-1.pdf>

Discussion Questions

- Briefly peruse the pursuit passages from the link above (1 Sam 19:18-23, 21:1-9, 21:10-15, 22:1-23, all of chapter 23, 26:1-12). What do you see as themes here? Where are the spaces where David could have connected with God through writing and praying? Before reading Psalm 54, what themes/ideas do you think he may include?
- Now read Psalm 54? How'd you do? Did you see any of your ideas reflected in the Psalm? What did you miss?
- Are there parts of the Psalm that would be difficult for you to pray as you put yourself in David's shoes? What about your life? Can you identify "foes" to pray against? How does that feel?
- As you think through the process and principles of praying imprecatory Psalms from the article below and the sermon - praying no harm upon God-imaged life, releasing judgement into the only Just Judge's hands, redefining the true enemies (powers and principalities using sin), and reorienting towards God and his faithfulness - how does this form your prayers for your situation? Take time to pray in silence using the words of this prayer. Share your insights and Spirit-led nudges.
- If it is still difficult to pray aspects of this, put Jesus in all the hard places. He does exact judgement and destruction upon the real enemies - destroys death with life and resurrection! He defeats Satan and all the powers of darkness. Pray with him as he prays with you through your life and the struggles you may be facing. **Share with one another this process! Not only in group, but in between groups!**

Pray for Enemies—and against Them? Lessons from the Psalms

Christians pray for their enemies—but should they also pray *against* them? Consider two verses. Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44^L). But David says—of an enemy—“Let there be none who extend to him loyal love, nor any who pities his orphans. Let his descendants be cut off. Let their name be blotted out in the next generation” (Ps 109:12–13^L).

Are Jesus and David contradicting one another?¹ Should we pray “imprecations” (prayers for God to bring retributive justice to wicked enemies) like these?²

The first thing we must remember is that the imprecatory prayers of the Psalms are inspired Scripture and therefore profitable in the Christian life. We cannot disregard these portions of God’s Word or pass them off as irrelevant to Christianity because of their perceived ancient barbarism. They are indeed “profitable . . . that every person of God may be equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16–17^L).

Certain psalms are sometimes called “imprecatory psalms,” but this isn’t quite right. There are no psalms in the Psalter that are entirely filled with imprecations. Rather, the imprecations are found in psalms that convey a cry for reprieve from deep distress, sometimes distress inflicted even from close friends (Ps 55:12–14^L).

When we understand these psalms in their original contexts, we find that these prayers are not comprehensive vindictive attacks from the psalmists; they are not the equivalent of nasty comments on social media.

Instead, they are expressions of deep trust in the Lord to execute justice in ways that are fitting to the retribution principle, a concept that was entirely fitting to the biblical world—and ought to be in ours. Without retribution or punishment, there is no justice. In many of these imprecations, the psalmist asks the Lord to do to his enemies what they have done to him (for example, Ps 137:8–9^L), and, importantly, he entrusts that outcome to the Lord’s will, not his personal vindication. He is not promising to take revenge; he is leaving vengeance in the just hands of God.

Desire no harm

First, our primary desire cannot be the harm of another image-bearer. Instead, like the psalmists, our cry to God is an expression of our hope and trust in him to ease our suffering. God is not our cosmic genie to wipe out our enemies, and we should not be surprised when he answers any vindictive imprecations with a resounding, “No.” The psalmists were writing in desperate situations. Do our experiences really rise above “frustrating nuisance” to the level of “legitimate injustice,” as theirs did?

That being said, some of us will experience severe injustice at some point, perhaps too difficult to imagine. It is at these times that the imprecations in the Psalms may mean the most to God’s beleaguered people. Cries for justice are good, not evil. When we cry out to God in those moments, of course, we must leave vengeance in God’s hands rather than thinking our prayer can coerce God to do harm to another image-bearer (Deut 32:35a^L; Rom 12:19^L). So examining our motivation for praying these psalms is a good first step in deciding whether you should ever pray these harsh words. Are you really leaving vengeance in God’s hands? Or do you vindictively desire harm against your enemies?

Acknowledge sin

Secondly, praying imprecations can be a reminder to us of the heinousness of sin, including our own. When we conclude that praying for God to curse our enemies is the best course of action, we should also remember that our sin is equally as heinous as the one(s) we are praying against. Jonathan Edwards discusses “hatred” as a religious affection stirred by God’s Spirit; not all hatred is sin.³ However, this hatred is not a hatred for another person, but a hatred of sin. If we hate sin committed against us

enough to pray curses on someone else, then we also should hate our own sin enough to pray the same for ourselves as God sanctifies us through discipline (Heb 12:5–11^L). This point simply serves as a reminder that imprecatory prayers should also include a significant measure of humility.

The new covenant in Christ turns our hearts toward our enemies in love and service. When we pray imprecations and leave judgment in God's hands, it frees our hearts to serve our enemies. When Jesus said, "love your enemies," I don't think it was limited to an emotion in our hearts (though that is certainly included!). I think he intended love to be displayed in noticeable action for the benefit of our enemies. When we are spiritually crippled by revenge and hate, we cannot serve our enemies from a pure heart. However, when our prayer for harm against our enemies is actually a way of leaving our personal vengeance in the hands of the Lord, our souls are freed from the hatred that might cripple us. The trick is to examine our hearts and humbly confirm that we are leaving vengeance to the Lord. We should couple our prayer of imprecation with a prayer for God to reveal any vengeance in the recesses of our hearts.

Similarly, when we say it is acceptable for Christians to pray imprecations today, we must also realize that our prayer of imprecation to remove evil may not be God's chosen method for removing that evil. Rather than judging our enemies to remove the evil, he may save them instead. That's what he did for us in our rebellion.

When Jonah brought a message of judgment to Nineveh, he genuinely proclaimed judgment on the Assyrians (Jonah 3:4^L), and he wanted to see them destroyed. And yet it was God's will that Nineveh would repent (Jonah 3:5–10^L). Jonah was not happy with that repentance (Jonah 4:1^L); his pity party after the success of his ministry is legendary. The question for us is: "Can we pray imprecations against an enemy and still be overjoyed if God draws them to Christ in order to remove their evil?"

Yes, we may be allowed to pray imprecations, but what will be exposed in our hearts when God acts in mercy instead of judgment? Will we be able to praise God for answering our imprecatory words in those moments?

Balance vengeance with humility and caution

The Psalms give us a voice to cry out to God with appropriate language for dire situations. And yet we must balance that vengeance with humility and caution, so that God may deal with our enemies however he chooses. When discussing biblical imprecations in this way, we must also be mindful that some people have suffered from unfathomable evil committed against them.

In those moments, a prayer of imprecation, handing over these expressions of anger and vengeance to the One who sits on the throne and always judges righteously (Ps 9:4 ) , is probably the correct action. He may answer our prayer affirmatively. He may also remove the evil by saving our enemies. Or he may reserve justice until the final judgment.

In any of those outcomes, the imprecatory psalms remind us to leave vengeance to the Lord, and they free our hearts to love and serve our enemies.