

**Question: "What are the imprecatory psalms?"**

**Answer:** The book of Psalms is rich with poetry, praise, joy, sorrow, and more. It was written by several authors, including King David. There are seven major types of psalms found in this book: lament psalms, thanksgiving psalms, enthronement psalms, pilgrimage psalms, royal psalms, wisdom psalms, and imprecatory psalms.

An imprecation is a curse that invokes misfortune upon someone. Imprecatory psalms are those in which the author imprecates; that is, he calls down calamity, destruction, and God's anger and judgment on his enemies. This type of psalm is found throughout the book. The major imprecatory psalms are Psalms 5, 10, 17, 35, 58, 59, 69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 129, 137, and 140. The following are a few examples of the imprecatory language gleaned from these psalms:

"Declare them guilty, O God! Let their intrigues be their downfall. Banish them for their many sins, for they have rebelled against you" (Psalm 5:10).

"Rise up, LORD, confront them, bring them down; with your sword rescue me from the wicked" (Psalm 17:13).

"Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not acknowledge you, on the kingdoms that do not call on your name; for they have devoured Jacob and devastated his homeland" (Psalm 79:6–7).

"Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (Psalm 137:9).

When studying the imprecatory psalms, it is important to note that these psalms were not written out of vindictiveness or a need for personal vengeance. Instead, they are prayers that keep God's justice, sovereignty, and protection in mind. God's people had suffered much at the hands of those who opposed them, including the Hittites, Amorites, Philistines, and Babylonians (the subject of Psalm 137). These groups were not only enemies of Israel, but they were also enemies of God; they were degenerate and ruthless conquerors who had repeatedly tried and failed to destroy the Lord's chosen people. In writing the imprecatory psalms, the authors sought vindication on God's behalf as much as they sought their own.

While Jesus Himself quoted some imprecatory psalms (John 2:17; 15:25), He also instructed us to love our enemies and pray for them (Matthew 5:44–48; Luke 6:27–38). The New Testament makes it clear that our enemy is spiritual, not physical (Ephesians 6:12). It is not sinful to pray the imprecatory psalms against our spiritual enemies, but we should also pray with compassion and love and even thanksgiving for people who are under the devil's influence (1 Timothy 2:1). We should desire their salvation. After all, God "is patient . . . not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Above all things, we should seek the will of God in everything we do and, when we are wronged, leave the ultimate outcome to the Lord (Romans 12:19).

The bottom line is that the imprecatory psalms communicate a deep yearning for justice, written from the point of view of those who had been mightily oppressed. God's people have the promise of divine vengeance: "Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:7–8; cf. Revelation 19:2).