

THE ETHICAL PROBLEM OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

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OF THE hundred and fifty Psalms in the Psalter, six are commonly classified as "imprecatory" Psalms. These are the 55th, 59th, 69th, 79th, 109th and 137th. The 137th is not ascribed to a particular author; the scene pictured in it is "by the rivers of Babylon". The 79th is ascribed to Asaph, and the remaining four to David.

It must be admitted that the designation "imprecatory" is open to objection on the ground that as applied to these Psalms it is not merely descriptive of the content of the Psalms but also commonly conveys a certain impression of reproach, a certain element of disapproval on the part of the person using the term. These Psalms are indeed imprecatory, if this term be understood in its proper sense of invoking a judgment, calamity or curse, and the objection is not to the term itself so much as to the manner of its use by many persons, as if to designate a Psalm as "imprecatory" were almost the same as calling it "wicked" or "immoral". Though various other designations, such as "Psalms of Justice", have been suggested, these are not satisfactory because they fail to designate that which differentiates these Psalms from the other parts of the Psalter. Consequently in the present article we shall avail ourselves of the common designation of "Imprecatory Psalms".

Certain expressions in these Psalms have caused a great deal of abuse to be heaped upon them, some persons even going so far as to say that they breathe a savage spirit and are totally unfit for Christian devotional use. The Imprecatory Psalms contain prayers for the destruction of certain persons. A prayer implies a sincere desire for the thing prayed for. Objectors to the Imprecatory Psalms assert that a

desire for the destruction of another is immoral, and therefore that the Psalms which express such a desire are immoral and their use in worship improper and sinful.

The ethical problem of the Imprecatory Psalms may be formulated with respect to these Psalms regarded as compositions or prayers of the Psalmists, or it may be formulated with respect to these Psalms regarded in relation to the Christian of the new dispensation. In the former case we shall ask the question: How can it be right to wish or pray for the destruction or doom of others as is done in the Imprecatory Psalms? In the latter case the question will be: Is it right for a Christian to use the Imprecatory Psalms in the worship of God, and if so, in what sense can he make the language of these Psalms his own? It will be perceived that these two formulations do not represent two distinct problems but rather two aspects of what is basically one problem, and also that the second aspect of the problem is subordinate to the first. Whether it is right for a Christian to use these Psalms in the worship of God depends upon whether it can be right to wish or pray for the destruction or doom of others. The question concerning the legitimacy of the practical use of these Psalms is thus inseparable from, and subordinate to, the question concerning the ethical principles involved in the Psalms themselves. The major portion of the present article will be devoted to the consideration of this prior ethical question, after which an answer to the question concerning the legitimacy of the use of these Psalms will be attempted.

A number of unsatisfactory, or only partially satisfactory, solutions of the problem have been proposed. Perhaps the most prevalent of these today — in America, at least — is the purported solution associated with the system of Scripture interpretation known as Modern Dispensationalism.^x According to this scheme of interpretation, the Psalter belongs primarily to the dispensation of law, not to the dispensation of grace. Any connection which it may have with the dispensation of grace or the so-called "Church age" is therefore purely prophetic. Some of the Psalms contain prophecies of

^x *Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 599; Hull, *Two Thousand Hours in the Psalms*, p. 523.

the coming of the Messiah, but it is held that their ethical concepts belong to the dispensation of law and cannot be transferred or applied to the dispensation of grace. This eliminates the ethical problem of the Imprecatory Psalms by maintaining that while it was right for the Old Testament saints, living under the dispensation of law, to invoke divine judgment upon their enemies, still it would be wrong for Christian people, living under the dispensation of grace, to do the same.

This dispensational treatment of the Imprecatory Psalms must be rejected for two reasons. First, because it is based upon a false and unwarranted scheme of Scripture interpretation; there is no evidence in the Bible itself for the system, so popular today, of dividing history into seven distinct dispensations during each of which man is tested by God with respect to some specific principle; the whole dispensational scheme, as set forth, for example, in the Scofield notes, is not something derived from the Bible itself but something imposed on the Bible from outside sources. Second, because the attempted solution of the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms virtually makes Scripture contradict Scripture. According to this interpretation, a thing which was right for David is wrong for us today since the moral law as such is held to be applicable only to the dispensation of law, while during the dispensation of grace it gives way to a different principle. Thus one part of Scripture is set over against another part of Scripture in such a way that the different parts virtually contradict each other. A considerable portion of the Psalter is vitiated for Christian devotional use by the claim that it belongs to the dispensation of law, not to that of grace, and is therefore dominated by an entirely different principle from that under which the Christian believer lives, although Scofield himself does not draw this inference.

Another unsatisfactory solution of the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms that has been suggested is the assertion that these Psalms do not express a desire for the doom of the wicked, but merely predict that doom. They do not seek the destruction or condemnation of any man, it is said, but merely predict, in graphic terms, the ruin which is sure to overtake the impenitent sinner, according to the principle

that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap".² In support of this contention it has been urged that the Hebrew language, unlike the Greek, does not have a special mood to express the optative. While it is of course true that Hebrew differs from Greek in this respect, it by no means follows that it is impossible to express a wish in the Hebrew language; we may be quite confident that there is no human speech in which a wish or prayer cannot be expressed. This explanation breaks down when the actual words of the Imprecatory Psalms are examined, since, while it is possible that some expressions in these Psalms are to be understood as predictions of fact rather than as prayers, it is nevertheless certain that most of the expressions must be regarded as prayers and that many of them are prayers in form and definitely addressed to God. Psalm 55:9 may be cited as an example: "Destroy, O Lord, and divide their tongue; for I have seen violence and strife in the city". Psalm 59 throughout is definitely a prayer to God, beginning with the words "Deliver me from mine enemies, O my God", and ending with the words "Unto thee, O my strength, will I sing praises: for God is my high tower, the God of my mercy". Six times in seventeen verses the Psalmist definitely addresses God. The same thing is true to a greater or less extent of the other Imprecatory Psalms. We are forced to conclude that the Imprecatory Psalms are prayers for the doom of the wicked, and not merely predictions of that doom. The suggested explanation must therefore be rejected as contrary to the language used in the Psalms themselves.

A third suggested explanation of the Imprecatory Psalms asserts that the imprecations contained in them are to be understood only in a spiritual or figurative sense. According to this explanation, when David, for example, prays for the destruction of his enemies, we are to understand that his spiritual enemies are meant, and not human beings in the flesh. This amounts to an attempt to find an easy way out of the difficulty by boldly explaining away the statements of Scripture. It is perfectly obvious that the wicked persons whose doom is prayed for in the Imprecatory Psalms are not

² Galatians 6:7.

temptations, sinful tendencies in human nature, nor even demonic powers. They are human beings, who may, indeed, have been under the influence of demonic powers, but who were none the less human. In Psalm 109:6 the person whose doom is sought is clearly human and distinguished from demonic powers: "Set thou a wicked man over him: and let Satan stand at his right hand". The same Psalm continues: "Let his days be few; and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow".³ Part of this is quoted in Acts 1:20 and there stated to have been prophetic of, and fulfilled in, Judas Iscariot. While it is no doubt true that the reference of the Imprecatory Psalms cannot be *limited* to the particular persons concerning whom these prayers were first offered to God, still the fact remains that these Psalms do, as is clearly indicated by the way in which the New Testament interprets Psalm 109 of Judas Iscariot, refer to particular human persons, known or unknown to us, and that therefore their meaning cannot be spiritualized to make them refer to purely spiritual or non-human powers or persons.

A fourth suggested explanation proceeds chiefly from those who do not accept the divine inspiration and authority of the Psalter, and asserts, in effect, that the Imprecatory Psalms are to be taken in their plain and obvious meaning, that they refer to definite persons living at the time when the Psalms were composed, but that they proceed not from divine inspiration but simply from personal vindictiveness on the part of David and the other writers. In other words, David prayed for the doom of his enemies; in doing so, David did wrong, at least as judged by Christian standards. There is really no problem involved, for the knot is cut in this fashion: to pray for the doom of another is sinful; David prayed for the doom of others; therefore David sinned. We should simply recognize that this was the sin of David, and although we may condone the sin on the ground that ethical standards were lower in David's time than now, still we in this Christian age ought to cultivate a milder and kindlier spirit.

³ Psalm 109:8, 9.

This purported explanation is open to two serious objections. First, it is contrary to the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures. In addition to all the evidence that might be cited to show that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God",⁴ attention may be called here to II Samuel 23:1, 2 where divine inspiration is definitely claimed for the Psalms of David: "Now these are the last words of David. David the son of Jesse saith, and the man who was raised on high saith, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet Psalmist of Israel: the Spirit of Jehovah spake by me, and his word was upon my tongue". Any attempted solution of the ethical problem of the Imprecatory Psalms which regards these Psalms as merely human compositions must be rejected as contrary to a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, as well as to the claim made by the Scripture itself for the inspiration of the Psalter. Second, this explanation is contrary to the known history of David, who wrote four of the six Psalms commonly classified as imprecatory. Everything that is known of David shows that he was not a person of a vengeful or vindictive character. At En-gedi⁵ and again at Ziph⁶ David had Saul in his power and could easily have taken his life, but refused to do so. When Shimei came out and cursed David, and Abishai wished to cross over and take off his head, David replied, "What have I to do with you, ye sons of Zeruiah?... Let him alone, and let him curse; for Jehovah hath bidden him".⁷ Again, we find David inquiring: "Is there not yet any of the house of Saul, that I may show the kindness of God unto him?"⁸ Some might see an element of personal vindictiveness in David's dying charge to Solomon to execute the death penalty on Joab and Shimei,⁹ but the fact that David refrained from putting these men to death during his own lifetime indicates rather that it was not personal vindictiveness but concern for public justice that motivated his instructions to Solomon. While David was

⁴ II Timothy 3:16.

⁵ I Samuel 24:1-15.

⁶ I Samuel 26:1-25.

⁷ II Samuel 16:10, 11.

⁸ II Samuel 9:3.

⁹ I Kings 2:5, 6, 8, 9.

of course not without sin, yet there is nothing in his recorded history that in any way corresponds to such an interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms, and there is much recorded of his relations to his enemies which shows that he was not a vindictive person but a man of a mild and even a forbearing spirit. The explanation which would ascribe the expressions of the Imprecatory Psalms to a desire on the part of the Psalmist for personal revenge must therefore be rejected as contrary to the biblical data.

A fifth suggested explanation of the Imprecatory Psalms regards them as outbursts of the moral feeling of humanity called forth by unusually brutal or inhuman crimes. When some extraordinarily brutal or atrocious crime has been committed, there is a universal demand that the guilty persons be punished, and this demand is not a demand for personal vengeance but a kind of indignation springing from the outraged moral sense of humanity. In the same way, it is alleged, the Imprecatory Psalms are not prayers for personal revenge upon adversaries, but cries to the all-just God to judge and condemn the wicked. It must be admitted that this explanation is less unsatisfactory than the others which have been enumerated. It is true that the Imprecatory Psalms are not prayers for personal revenge. It is also true that they are prayers to the all-just God to judge and condemn the wicked. But it is not true that the Imprecatory Psalms proceed wholly, or even primarily, from the outraged moral feeling of humanity. To assert that they do, is to overlook their divine inspiration and authority and to regard them as merely human compositions, the product of human religious experience and moral life. And it must be added that the Imprecatory Psalms contain some petitions which can hardly be justified simply on the basis of the outraged moral feeling of humanity, such, for example, as Psalm 109:12 ("Neither let there be any to have pity on his fatherless children") and Psalm 137:9 ("Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock"). If these words are simply the expression of an outraged sense of justice, shocked by violent crimes, it is difficult to see how they can be reconciled with Deuteronomy 24:16, which commands that "the fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the

children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin". The outraged moral feeling of humanity may cry out and demand the death of the person who has broken the law, but the prayer for the destruction of his infant children cannot be justified simply on the basis of the moral feeling of mankind. This explanation, while it recognizes certain essential features of the Imprecatory Psalms, cannot be regarded as satisfactory or adequate because it fails to recognize the divine character of the Imprecatory Psalms and to justify all of the expressions used in them.

Turning, then, from the various solutions of the ethical problem of the Imprecatory Psalms which have been suggested, the following is proposed as a solution of the problem along a different line, namely, by a criticism of the presuppositions on which the usual objections to the Imprecatory Psalms are based. The problem, viewed with respect to the principles involved in the Psalms themselves, was defined thus: How can it be right to wish or pray for the doom or destruction of others as is done in the Imprecatory Psalms? Subordinately to this, the question was raised: Is it right for a Christian to use the Imprecatory Psalms in the worship of God, and if so, in what sense can he make the language of these Psalms his own? The usual objections to the Imprecatory Psalms assert that it is not right to wish or pray for the doom or destruction of another, and that therefore a Christian cannot consistently use these Psalms in the worship of God, nor make their language his own except perhaps in a figurative sense far removed from their original and proper meaning. The fundamental objection, or major premise of the argument, then, is that it is immoral to wish or pray for the doom or destruction of another. This objection is, perhaps often unconsciously, founded upon two presuppositions. The first is, that the welfare of man is the chief end of man; and the second, that man has rights which even God is bound to respect.

If the first presupposition, that the welfare of man is the chief end of man, be granted, then it follows necessarily that it is wrong to wish or pray for the doom or destruction of any human being. In that case, we should only pray for the

present good and eternal salvation of every member of the human race, regardless of how wicked a particular person may be, or how great an offence and occasion of stumbling to the people of God. I John 5:16, however, states that "there is a sin unto death: not concerning this do I say that he should make request", and the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 183, states that prayer is to be made "for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter; but not for the dead, nor for those that are known to have sinned the sin unto death". In other words, there may exist cases in which the glory of God and the welfare of man conflict, and in such cases it is wrong to seek the welfare of the particular persons involved.

This presupposition, that the welfare of man is the chief end of man, is essentially humanistic, is contrary to theism, and overlooks the fact that man is not self-existent but a created being who is therefore dependent on God and who does not exist for himself but for God's glory. If man is the creature of God, then it follows that the chief end of man is to glorify God. Only by denying that man is the creature of God can it be successfully maintained that the chief end of man is the welfare of man. No doubt many of those who object to the Imprecatory Psalms, and who are influenced by the presupposition under discussion, do really believe in God in the theistic sense, but have been greatly influenced by the present-day non-theistic view of life, and in particular by the substitution of the theory of evolution for the biblical doctrine of the creation of man; and this influence may often have been so great as to render the viewpoint of such persons practically (though not theoretically) atheistic. This non-theistic view of life is exceedingly common and popular today and has penetrated the preaching and church life, as well as the newspaper and magazine theology, of our time far more than is commonly realized. The proposition that the chief end of man is the welfare of man is unchallenged in many circles, and it is this point of view that is at the bottom of most, if not all, of the objections to the Imprecatory Psalms. Our answer to those objections, then, must in the first place be a challenge to the legitimacy of this presupposition. The chief end of man is to glorify God, not to seek the welfare of man. These two are of course not mutually

exclusive; the glory of God includes the welfare of man in general, but Scripture teaches that particular cases may, and do, exist where the two conflict, and in such cases the believer must seek the glory of God and not the welfare of man which is in conflict with the glory of God.

The second presupposition underlying the objections to the Imprecatory Psalms is that man has rights which even God is bound to respect. This presupposition tacitly, perhaps unconsciously, regards the moral law as something which exists independently of God himself, something to which God as well as man is subject. It is of course quite true that God will never act contrary to the moral law, but this is simply because the moral law is an expression of the nature or character of God, and God cannot deny himself.¹⁰ Whatever God does is in harmony with the moral law, simply because God does it, for God cannot act contrary to his own nature of which the moral law is an expression; but this is a very different matter from the notion that the moral law is something above and beyond, which exists independently even of God himself, and which God is bound to obey in the same sense that man is bound to obey it. The very idea of obligation to obey the moral law implies a higher power to whom man is responsible. In the nature of the case there can be no higher power to whom God can be responsible. None can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou? It follows that many things which would be wrong for man to do, are right when done by God. A man who throws a bomb in a crowded street and kills a number of people may be guilty of murder, but when God in his providential government sends an earthquake and destroys thousands or tens of thousands of people he is wholly righteous in doing so. It is wrong for man to put the children to death for the sins of the fathers, yet God visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those that hate him, and it is worthy of note that this truth is affirmed in the very Decalogue which is the summary of the moral law given by God to man as a rule of life.¹¹

¹⁰ II Timothy 2:13.

¹¹ Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9.

Man is a created being and therefore possesses no rights except those conferred on him by God his Creator. On the subject of human rights, there is much confusion of thought at the present time. Many hold that in creating man, God somehow limited himself, and was thereupon under obligation to respect certain rights possessed by man. Some maintain that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are inalienable rights which not only man, but even God, is bound to respect. According to this view, not only would it have been wrong for David to slay his enemies by his own hand, but it would also have been wrong for God to bring this about in answer to David's prayers as recorded in the Imprecatory Psalms. Against such notions, the sovereignty of God must be affirmed. God and man are not equals, nor are they both responsible to some higher power or principle. God is the Creator, and man is the creature. Man is responsible to God, but God is not responsible to man. Man, therefore, has no rights whatever except those conferred on him by God; that is to say, man has no rights at all in the absolute sense, no rights to which appeal can be made in a controversy between man and God.

Furthermore, man as sinful, by the Fall, has forfeited even those rights conferred by God at his creation. Since the Fall, man is in the position of an outlaw and a rebel against God's authority, possessing no legal status whatever and debarred from claiming rights of any kind. Man is not merely a creature, but a sinner, and is therefore totally devoid of rights which God must respect. In other words, whatever of good man may ever attain can come from no other source than the free, sovereign and unmerited grace of God.

It is true, of course, that by the common grace of God even sinful man has rights which other men are bound to respect, that is to say, civil rights which have validity within human society; but sinful man has no rights which God is bound to respect. Therefore while it would be wrong for man, acting on his own initiative and independently of commands from God, to plan, wish or pray for the destruction of the wicked, these would not be wrong if done by God himself or by man in obedience to specific commands of God. But such is precisely the character of the Imprecatory Psalms, for these

Psalms were given by divine inspiration and were therefore not simply the personal desires or petitions of men, but prayers offered under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit of God.

It is necessary to insist that evil and evil men exist only by the providential permission of God and not by any right of their own which they can claim before God. Satan's entire domain is a kingdom of usurpation. Sinful man does not have the right to a breath of air to inhale, a drop of water to drink, or a particle of food to eat, in God's world. He has, indeed, a civil right to these things, by God's common grace, which right must be respected by his fellow men. But life and the things which make it possible come ultimately not from man but from God, and sinful man has no right to these things which he can plead before God. It follows, then, that God may at any time, and in perfect harmony with his righteous nature, take away the life of sinful man, either by means of the forces and laws of nature, or by his commands addressed to men, as for example when the children of Israel were commanded to exterminate the inhabitants of Canaan. But if it is right for God to destroy evil and evil men in his universe, or to command his servants to effect that destruction, then it was also right for him to inspire the Psalmists to pray for that same work of destruction, and it was moreover right for the Psalmists to offer such prayers. It has already been shown from the history of David's life that the destruction of evil men which is prayed for in the Imprecatory Psalms was not motivated by a desire for personal revenge. It was, on the contrary, a judicial vindication of the name of God for which David prayed. This is shown, for example, by Psalm 59:13, where David prays: "Consume them in wrath, consume them, that they may not be: and let them know that God ruleth in Jacob unto the ends of the earth".

Ultimately, then, it was right for the Psalmists to pray for the destruction of the wicked because they were praying for God to do something which it was in harmony with God's nature for him to do, because the act of God which was prayed for conflicted with no actual rights of men, and because the prayers themselves were uttered by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and therefore must have been right.

prayers and could not have been immoral. The total destruction of evil, including the judicial destruction of evil men, is the prerogative of the sovereign God, and it is right not only to pray for the accomplishment of this destruction, but even to assist in effecting it when commanded to do so by God himself.

Scripture teaches that the wages of sin is death,¹² and since every man has sinned, every man is deserving of death, both physical and eternal. Even infants have sinned in Adam, who represented them in the Covenant of Works, and are therefore deserving of eternal death, though they are without actual transgressions. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines murder as "the taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbour unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto".¹³ When life is taken away justly, then, it is not murder but execution. Man, of course, does not possess the right to take away the life of his fellow man for every cause. But every man stands before the judgment bar, not only of his fellow men, but of God. Before that divine tribunal he stands guilty, a rebel, an outlaw, wholly without rights. Because he is guilty, he deserves to die. It is appointed unto men once to die,¹⁴ and in the end God brings about the death of every human being. Whether this is done by natural causes or in some other way is immaterial, *so far as the question of God's righteousness is concerned*. Ordinarily, man's death occurs as the result of natural causes, such as disease, accident or old age. At other times, man's death may be caused by murder, that is, by unjust violence on the part of man. Even though man is unjust in committing the murder, God is righteous in permitting it to be committed, for though the person murdered had a civil right to life which should have been respected by his fellow men, he had no moral right to life which he could plead against God. In still other cases, man's death may be caused by lawful violence on the part of man, according to the provision of Genesis 9:6, and in such cases it is not murder but *execution*. The extermination of the Canaanites by the children of Israel, for example, was not

¹² Romans 6:23.

¹³ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 69.

¹⁴ Hebrews 9:27.

murder but execution, because the persons killed had forfeited all right to life, and because the Israelites were not engaged in an ordinary war of conquest but in a divine program in which they were acting by the specially revealed commands of God for the administration of divine justice.¹⁵

The destruction of the wicked which is prayed for in the Imprecatory Psalms, then, is not murder but execution. These Psalms do not seek the unjust destruction of the life of man; on the contrary they are in essence an appeal to the justice of God and a prayer for that justice to execute sentence upon the wicked. The whole question of the morality of such prayers hinges upon the question of the compatibility of the thing prayed for with the nature of God; and since the prayers were inspired by the Holy Spirit, there need be no doubts on this point. The Imprecatory Psalms, considered as prayers of David and the other Psalmists, must be regarded as free from suspicion of immorality. God is both sovereign and righteous; he possesses the unquestionable right to destroy all evil in his universe; if it is right for God to plan and effect this destruction, then it is also right for the saints to pray for the same.

There remains to be considered the subordinate question whether it is right for Christians to use the Imprecatory Psalms in the worship of God, and if so, in what sense they can make the language of these Psalms their own. It must of course be recognized that inspiration and special revelation ceased with the completion of the documents which form the New Testament. Since that time, the saints have enjoyed illumination by the Spirit of God, but not inspiration or special revelation. It must also be recognized that only by special divine revelation could it be known *with absolute certainty* that a particular person was a reprobate. Beyond doubt many of those who are very wicked persons today will later in their lives be transformed by the grace of God and become saints. God has not revealed who the elect are. It is possible that a person may know concerning himself that he has committed the sin unto death. It is also possible that a Christian may *in certain exceptional cases* be able to judge

¹⁵ Compare Genesis 15:16.

with a high degree of probability whether a particular person has or has not committed that unpardonable sin. But man can never attain infallible knowledge except by divine revelation. The biblical account of the transformation of Saul the persecutor, breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,¹⁶ into Paul the apostle, who could say "to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain",¹⁷ should serve as a warning against all positive assertions that even the wickedest opponents and persecutors of Christianity in our own day are certainly reprobates. While the Psalmists in composing the Imprecatory Psalms undoubtedly had particular persons in mind, and while the apostle Peter speaking by the Holy Spirit quoted a portion of Psalm 109 and declared that it referred to Judas Iscariot,¹⁸ still it remains true that in no way except divine revelation could absolute certainty about the reprobation of a particular person be attained. Consequently if the Imprecatory Psalms are regarded as prayers for the *eternal* doom of wicked persons, no Christian could apply these Psalms to any particular person, or pray other prayers of the nature of the Imprecatory Psalms and offer such petitions to God for the eternal doom of particular persons. To do so would be presumptuous for it would involve a claim to infallibility or special revelation. It is not necessary to state that it would be sinful to pray for the eternal doom of an elect person, even in the case of an elect person who is still living in sin and in rebellion against God. Such prayers can be offered only with reference to the reprobate, never with reference to the elect.

We are, however, by no means warranted in assuming that the Imprecatory Psalms are *necessarily* prayers for the *eternal* doom of the wicked. They may also be regarded as prayers for severe temporal judgments upon the enemies of God. In the case of temporal judgments involving the physical death of wicked persons the eternal doom of those persons would inevitably follow, for the opportunity for repentance would be cut off forever. In such cases the Imprecatory Psalms, even if regarded as prayers for eternal doom, would be applicable because such persons would be the objects of

¹⁶ Acts 9:1.

¹⁷ Philippians 1:21.

¹⁸ Acts 1:16, 20.

divine reprobation. But the Christian could not offer such petitions to God for the physical death of particular persons, because he does not know which wicked persons, in the secret counsel of God, are reprobates and which are included in the election of grace.

The Christian can, indeed, pray for severe temporal judgments upon the enemies of God, but in doing so must leave to God the application of such petitions to particular persons because only God can discern between wicked persons who are the objects of reprobation and wicked persons who are included in the election of grace.

It may be concluded, then, that the Christian can use the Imprecatory Psalms in the worship of God, and can offer them as prayers to God, for temporal judgments short of death upon those enemies of God who in the divine secret counsel are elect persons, and for judgments including physical death and issuing in eternal death upon those enemies of God who in his secret and unrevealed counsel are reprobates. Even the prayer for the death of the wicked person who is a reprobate is not only not immoral but is in itself righteous and is, in fact, included in the pattern of prayer commonly called "The Lord's Prayer" which teaches us to pray: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven".¹⁹ God's kingdom cannot come without Satan's kingdom being destroyed. God's will cannot be done in earth without the destruction of evil. Evil cannot be destroyed without the destruction of men who are permanently identified with it. Instead of being influenced by the sickly sentimentalism of the present day, Christian people should realize that the glory of God demands the destruction of evil. Instead of being insistent upon the assumed, but really non-existent, rights of men, they should focus their attention upon the rights of God. Instead of being ashamed of the Imprecatory Psalms, and attempting to apologize for them and explain them away, Christian people should glory in them and not hesitate to use them in the public and private exercises of the worship of God.

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¹⁹ Matthew 6:10.



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THE ETHICAL PROBLEM OF THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS

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OF THE hundred and fifty Psalms in the Psalter, six are commonly classified as "imprecatory" Psalms. These are the 55th, 59th, 69th, 79th, 109th and 137th. The 137th is not ascribed to a particular author; the scene pictured in it is "by the rivers of Babylon". The 79th is ascribed to Asaph, and the remaining four to David.

It must be admitted that the designation "imprecatory" is open to objection on the ground that as applied to these Psalms it is not merely descriptive of the content of the Psalms but also commonly conveys a certain impression of reproach, a certain element of disapproval on the part of the person using the term. These Psalms are indeed imprecatory, if this term be understood in its proper sense of invoking a judgment, calamity or curse, and the objection is not to the term itself so much as to the manner of its use by many persons, as if to designate a Psalm as "imprecatory" were almost the same as calling it "wicked" or "immoral". Though various other designations, such as "Psalms of Justice", have been suggested, these are not satisfactory because they fail to designate that which differentiates these Psalms from the other parts of the Psalter. Consequently in the present article we shall avail ourselves of the common designation of "Imprecatory Psalms".

Certain expressions in these Psalms have caused a great deal of abuse to be heaped upon them, some persons even going so far as to say that they breathe a savage spirit and are totally unfit for Christian devotional use. The Imprecatory Psalms contain prayers for the destruction of certain persons. A prayer implies a sincere desire for the thing prayed for. Objectors to the Imprecatory Psalms assert that a

desire for the destruction of another is immoral, and therefore that the Psalms which express such a desire are immoral and their use in worship improper and sinful.

The ethical problem of the Imprecatory Psalms may be formulated with respect to these Psalms regarded as compositions or prayers of the Psalmists, or it may be formulated with respect to these Psalms regarded in relation to the Christian of the new dispensation. In the former case we shall ask the question: How can it be right to wish or pray for the destruction or doom of others as is done in the Imprecatory Psalms? In the latter case the question will be: Is it right for a Christian to use the Imprecatory Psalms in the worship of God, and if so, in what sense can he make the language of these Psalms his own? It will be perceived that these two formulations do not represent two distinct problems but rather two aspects of what is basically one problem, and also that the second aspect of the problem is subordinate to the first. Whether it is right for a Christian to use these Psalms in the worship of God depends upon whether it can be right to wish or pray for the destruction or doom of others. The question concerning the legitimacy of the practical use of these Psalms is thus inseparable from, and subordinate to, the question concerning the ethical principles involved in the Psalms themselves. The major portion of the present article will be devoted to the consideration of this prior ethical question, after which an answer to the question concerning the legitimacy of the use of these Psalms will be attempted.

A number of unsatisfactory, or only partially satisfactory, solutions of the problem have been proposed. Perhaps the most prevalent of these today — in America, at least — is the purported solution associated with the system of Scripture interpretation known as Modern Dispensationalism.^x According to this scheme of interpretation, the Psalter belongs primarily to the dispensation of law, not to the dispensation of grace. Any connection which it may have with the dispensation of grace or the so-called "Church age" is therefore purely prophetic. Some of the Psalms contain prophecies of

^x *Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 599; Hull, *Two Thousand Hours in the Psalms*, p. 523.

the coming of the Messiah, but it is held that their ethical concepts belong to the dispensation of law and cannot be transferred or applied to the dispensation of grace. This eliminates the ethical problem of the Imprecatory Psalms by maintaining that while it was right for the Old Testament saints, living under the dispensation of law, to invoke divine judgment upon their enemies, still it would be wrong for Christian people, living under the dispensation of grace, to do the same.

This dispensational treatment of the Imprecatory Psalms must be rejected for two reasons. First, because it is based upon a false and unwarranted scheme of Scripture interpretation; there is no evidence in the Bible itself for the system, so popular today, of dividing history into seven distinct dispensations during each of which man is tested by God with respect to some specific principle; the whole dispensational scheme, as set forth, for example, in the Scofield notes, is not something derived from the Bible itself but something imposed on the Bible from outside sources. Second, because the attempted solution of the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms virtually makes Scripture contradict Scripture. According to this interpretation, a thing which was right for David is wrong for us today since the moral law as such is held to be applicable only to the dispensation of law, while during the dispensation of grace it gives way to a different principle. Thus one part of Scripture is set over against another part of Scripture in such a way that the different parts virtually contradict each other. A considerable portion of the Psalter is vitiated for Christian devotional use by the claim that it belongs to the dispensation of law, not to that of grace, and is therefore dominated by an entirely different principle from that under which the Christian believer lives, although Scofield himself does not draw this inference.

Another unsatisfactory solution of the problem of the Imprecatory Psalms that has been suggested is the assertion that these Psalms do not express a desire for the doom of the wicked, but merely predict that doom. They do not seek the destruction or condemnation of any man, it is said, but merely predict, in graphic terms, the ruin which is sure to overtake the impenitent sinner, according to the principle

that "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap".² In support of this contention it has been urged that the Hebrew language, unlike the Greek, does not have a special mood to express the optative. While it is of course true that Hebrew differs from Greek in this respect, it by no means follows that it is impossible to express a wish in the Hebrew language; we may be quite confident that there is no human speech in which a wish or prayer cannot be expressed. This explanation breaks down when the actual words of the Imprecatory Psalms are examined, since, while it is possible that some expressions in these Psalms are to be understood as predictions of fact rather than as prayers, it is nevertheless certain that most of the expressions must be regarded as prayers and that many of them are prayers in form and definitely addressed to God. Psalm 55:9 may be cited as an example: "Destroy, O Lord, and divide their tongue; for I have seen violence and strife in the city". Psalm 59 throughout is definitely a prayer to God, beginning with the words "Deliver me from mine enemies, O my God", and ending with the words "Unto thee, O my strength, will I sing praises: for God is my high tower, the God of my mercy". Six times in seventeen verses the Psalmist definitely addresses God. The same thing is true to a greater or less extent of the other Imprecatory Psalms. We are forced to conclude that the Imprecatory Psalms are prayers for the doom of the wicked, and not merely predictions of that doom. The suggested explanation must therefore be rejected as contrary to the language used in the Psalms themselves.

A third suggested explanation of the Imprecatory Psalms asserts that the imprecations contained in them are to be understood only in a spiritual or figurative sense. According to this explanation, when David, for example, prays for the destruction of his enemies, we are to understand that his spiritual enemies are meant, and not human beings in the flesh. This amounts to an attempt to find an easy way out of the difficulty by boldly explaining away the statements of Scripture. It is perfectly obvious that the wicked persons whose doom is prayed for in the Imprecatory Psalms are not

² Galatians 6:7.

temptations, sinful tendencies in human nature, nor even demonic powers. They are human beings, who may, indeed, have been under the influence of demonic powers, but who were none the less human. In Psalm 109:6 the person whose doom is sought is clearly human and distinguished from demonic powers: "Set thou a wicked man over him: and let Satan stand at his right hand". The same Psalm continues: "Let his days be few; and let another take his office. Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow".³ Part of this is quoted in Acts 1:20 and there stated to have been prophetic of, and fulfilled in, Judas Iscariot. While it is no doubt true that the reference of the Imprecatory Psalms cannot be *limited* to the particular persons concerning whom these prayers were first offered to God, still the fact remains that these Psalms do, as is clearly indicated by the way in which the New Testament interprets Psalm 109 of Judas Iscariot, refer to particular human persons, known or unknown to us, and that therefore their meaning cannot be spiritualized to make them refer to purely spiritual or non-human powers or persons.

A fourth suggested explanation proceeds chiefly from those who do not accept the divine inspiration and authority of the Psalter, and asserts, in effect, that the Imprecatory Psalms are to be taken in their plain and obvious meaning, that they refer to definite persons living at the time when the Psalms were composed, but that they proceed not from divine inspiration but simply from personal vindictiveness on the part of David and the other writers. In other words, David prayed for the doom of his enemies; in doing so, David did wrong, at least as judged by Christian standards. There is really no problem involved, for the knot is cut in this fashion: to pray for the doom of another is sinful; David prayed for the doom of others; therefore David sinned. We should simply recognize that this was the sin of David, and although we may condone the sin on the ground that ethical standards were lower in David's time than now, still we in this Christian age ought to cultivate a milder and kindlier spirit.

³ Psalm 109:8, 9.

This purported explanation is open to two serious objections. First, it is contrary to the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures. In addition to all the evidence that might be cited to show that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God",⁴ attention may be called here to II Samuel 23:1, 2 where divine inspiration is definitely claimed for the Psalms of David: "Now these are the last words of David. David the son of Jesse saith, and the man who was raised on high saith, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet Psalmist of Israel: the Spirit of Jehovah spake by me, and his word was upon my tongue". Any attempted solution of the ethical problem of the Imprecatory Psalms which regards these Psalms as merely human compositions must be rejected as contrary to a fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith, as well as to the claim made by the Scripture itself for the inspiration of the Psalter. Second, this explanation is contrary to the known history of David, who wrote four of the six Psalms commonly classified as imprecatory. Everything that is known of David shows that he was not a person of a vengeful or vindictive character. At En-gedi⁵ and again at Ziph⁶ David had Saul in his power and could easily have taken his life, but refused to do so. When Shimei came out and cursed David, and Abishai wished to cross over and take off his head, David replied, "What have I to do with you, ye sons of Zeruiah?... Let him alone, and let him curse; for Jehovah hath bidden him".⁷ Again, we find David inquiring: "Is there not yet any of the house of Saul, that I may show the kindness of God unto him?"⁸ Some might see an element of personal vindictiveness in David's dying charge to Solomon to execute the death penalty on Joab and Shimei,⁹ but the fact that David refrained from putting these men to death during his own lifetime indicates rather that it was not personal vindictiveness but concern for public justice that motivated his instructions to Solomon. While David was

⁴ II Timothy 3:16.

⁵ I Samuel 24:1-15.

⁶ I Samuel 26:1-25.

⁷ II Samuel 16:10, 11.

⁸ II Samuel 9:3.

⁹ I Kings 2:5, 6, 8, 9.

of course not without sin, yet there is nothing in his recorded history that in any way corresponds to such an interpretation of the Imprecatory Psalms, and there is much recorded of his relations to his enemies which shows that he was not a vindictive person but a man of a mild and even a forbearing spirit. The explanation which would ascribe the expressions of the Imprecatory Psalms to a desire on the part of the Psalmist for personal revenge must therefore be rejected as contrary to the biblical data.

A fifth suggested explanation of the Imprecatory Psalms regards them as outbursts of the moral feeling of humanity called forth by unusually brutal or inhuman crimes. When some extraordinarily brutal or atrocious crime has been committed, there is a universal demand that the guilty persons be punished, and this demand is not a demand for personal vengeance but a kind of indignation springing from the outraged moral sense of humanity. In the same way, it is alleged, the Imprecatory Psalms are not prayers for personal revenge upon adversaries, but cries to the all-just God to judge and condemn the wicked. It must be admitted that this explanation is less unsatisfactory than the others which have been enumerated. It is true that the Imprecatory Psalms are not prayers for personal revenge. It is also true that they are prayers to the all-just God to judge and condemn the wicked. But it is not true that the Imprecatory Psalms proceed wholly, or even primarily, from the outraged moral feeling of humanity. To assert that they do, is to overlook their divine inspiration and authority and to regard them as merely human compositions, the product of human religious experience and moral life. And it must be added that the Imprecatory Psalms contain some petitions which can hardly be justified simply on the basis of the outraged moral feeling of humanity, such, for example, as Psalm 109:12 ("Neither let there be any to have pity on his fatherless children") and Psalm 137:9 ("Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the rock"). If these words are simply the expression of an outraged sense of justice, shocked by violent crimes, it is difficult to see how they can be reconciled with Deuteronomy 24:16, which commands that "the fathers shall not be put to death for the children, neither shall the

children be put to death for the fathers: every man shall be put to death for his own sin". The outraged moral feeling of humanity may cry out and demand the death of the person who has broken the law, but the prayer for the destruction of his infant children cannot be justified simply on the basis of the moral feeling of mankind. This explanation, while it recognizes certain essential features of the Imprecatory Psalms, cannot be regarded as satisfactory or adequate because it fails to recognize the divine character of the Imprecatory Psalms and to justify all of the expressions used in them.

Turning, then, from the various solutions of the ethical problem of the Imprecatory Psalms which have been suggested, the following is proposed as a solution of the problem along a different line, namely, by a criticism of the presuppositions on which the usual objections to the Imprecatory Psalms are based. The problem, viewed with respect to the principles involved in the Psalms themselves, was defined thus: How can it be right to wish or pray for the doom or destruction of others as is done in the Imprecatory Psalms? Subordinately to this, the question was raised: Is it right for a Christian to use the Imprecatory Psalms in the worship of God, and if so, in what sense can he make the language of these Psalms his own? The usual objections to the Imprecatory Psalms assert that it is not right to wish or pray for the doom or destruction of another, and that therefore a Christian cannot consistently use these Psalms in the worship of God, nor make their language his own except perhaps in a figurative sense far removed from their original and proper meaning. The fundamental objection, or major premise of the argument, then, is that it is immoral to wish or pray for the doom or destruction of another. This objection is, perhaps often unconsciously, founded upon two presuppositions. The first is, that the welfare of man is the chief end of man; and the second, that man has rights which even God is bound to respect.

If the first presupposition, that the welfare of man is the chief end of man, be granted, then it follows necessarily that it is wrong to wish or pray for the doom or destruction of any human being. In that case, we should only pray for the

present good and eternal salvation of every member of the human race, regardless of how wicked a particular person may be, or how great an offence and occasion of stumbling to the people of God. I John 5:16, however, states that "there is a sin unto death: not concerning this do I say that he should make request", and the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. 183, states that prayer is to be made "for all sorts of men living, or that shall live hereafter; but not for the dead, nor for those that are known to have sinned the sin unto death". In other words, there may exist cases in which the glory of God and the welfare of man conflict, and in such cases it is wrong to seek the welfare of the particular persons involved.

This presupposition, that the welfare of man is the chief end of man, is essentially humanistic, is contrary to theism, and overlooks the fact that man is not self-existent but a created being who is therefore dependent on God and who does not exist for himself but for God's glory. If man is the creature of God, then it follows that the chief end of man is to glorify God. Only by denying that man is the creature of God can it be successfully maintained that the chief end of man is the welfare of man. No doubt many of those who object to the Imprecatory Psalms, and who are influenced by the presupposition under discussion, do really believe in God in the theistic sense, but have been greatly influenced by the present-day non-theistic view of life, and in particular by the substitution of the theory of evolution for the biblical doctrine of the creation of man; and this influence may often have been so great as to render the viewpoint of such persons practically (though not theoretically) atheistic. This non-theistic view of life is exceedingly common and popular today and has penetrated the preaching and church life, as well as the newspaper and magazine theology, of our time far more than is commonly realized. The proposition that the chief end of man is the welfare of man is unchallenged in many circles, and it is this point of view that is at the bottom of most, if not all, of the objections to the Imprecatory Psalms. Our answer to those objections, then, must in the first place be a challenge to the legitimacy of this presupposition. The chief end of man is to glorify God, not to seek the welfare of man. These two are of course not mutually

exclusive; the glory of God includes the welfare of man in general, but Scripture teaches that particular cases may, and do, exist where the two conflict, and in such cases the believer must seek the glory of God and not the welfare of man which is in conflict with the glory of God.

The second presupposition underlying the objections to the Imprecatory Psalms is that man has rights which even God is bound to respect. This presupposition tacitly, perhaps unconsciously, regards the moral law as something which exists independently of God himself, something to which God as well as man is subject. It is of course quite true that God will never act contrary to the moral law, but this is simply because the moral law is an expression of the nature or character of God, and God cannot deny himself.¹⁰ Whatever God does is in harmony with the moral law, simply because God does it, for God cannot act contrary to his own nature of which the moral law is an expression; but this is a very different matter from the notion that the moral law is something above and beyond, which exists independently even of God himself, and which God is bound to obey in the same sense that man is bound to obey it. The very idea of obligation to obey the moral law implies a higher power to whom man is responsible. In the nature of the case there can be no higher power to whom God can be responsible. None can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou? It follows that many things which would be wrong for man to do, are right when done by God. A man who throws a bomb in a crowded street and kills a number of people may be guilty of murder, but when God in his providential government sends an earthquake and destroys thousands or tens of thousands of people he is wholly righteous in doing so. It is wrong for man to put the children to death for the sins of the fathers, yet God visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those that hate him, and it is worthy of note that this truth is affirmed in the very Decalogue which is the summary of the moral law given by God to man as a rule of life.¹¹

¹⁰ II Timothy 2:13.

¹¹ Exodus 20:5; Deuteronomy 5:9.

Man is a created being and therefore possesses no rights except those conferred on him by God his Creator. On the subject of human rights, there is much confusion of thought at the present time. Many hold that in creating man, God somehow limited himself, and was thereupon under obligation to respect certain rights possessed by man. Some maintain that life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are inalienable rights which not only man, but even God, is bound to respect. According to this view, not only would it have been wrong for David to slay his enemies by his own hand, but it would also have been wrong for God to bring this about in answer to David's prayers as recorded in the Imprecatory Psalms. Against such notions, the sovereignty of God must be affirmed. God and man are not equals, nor are they both responsible to some higher power or principle. God is the Creator, and man is the creature. Man is responsible to God, but God is not responsible to man. Man, therefore, has no rights whatever except those conferred on him by God; that is to say, man has no rights at all in the absolute sense, no rights to which appeal can be made in a controversy between man and God.

Furthermore, man as sinful, by the Fall, has forfeited even those rights conferred by God at his creation. Since the Fall, man is in the position of an outlaw and a rebel against God's authority, possessing no legal status whatever and debarred from claiming rights of any kind. Man is not merely a creature, but a sinner, and is therefore totally devoid of rights which God must respect. In other words, whatever of good man may ever attain can come from no other source than the free, sovereign and unmerited grace of God.

It is true, of course, that by the common grace of God even sinful man has rights which other men are bound to respect, that is to say, civil rights which have validity within human society; but sinful man has no rights which God is bound to respect. Therefore while it would be wrong for man, acting on his own initiative and independently of commands from God, to plan, wish or pray for the destruction of the wicked, these would not be wrong if done by God himself or by man in obedience to specific commands of God. But such is precisely the character of the Imprecatory Psalms, for these

Psalms were given by divine inspiration and were therefore not simply the personal desires or petitions of men, but prayers offered under the direct influence of the Holy Spirit of God.

It is necessary to insist that evil and evil men exist only by the providential permission of God and not by any right of their own which they can claim before God. Satan's entire domain is a kingdom of usurpation. Sinful man does not have the right to a breath of air to inhale, a drop of water to drink, or a particle of food to eat, in God's world. He has, indeed, a civil right to these things, by God's common grace, which right must be respected by his fellow men. But life and the things which make it possible come ultimately not from man but from God, and sinful man has no right to these things which he can plead before God. It follows, then, that God may at any time, and in perfect harmony with his righteous nature, take away the life of sinful man, either by means of the forces and laws of nature, or by his commands addressed to men, as for example when the children of Israel were commanded to exterminate the inhabitants of Canaan. But if it is right for God to destroy evil and evil men in his universe, or to command his servants to effect that destruction, then it was also right for him to inspire the Psalmists to pray for that same work of destruction, and it was moreover right for the Psalmists to offer such prayers. It has already been shown from the history of David's life that the destruction of evil men which is prayed for in the Imprecatory Psalms was not motivated by a desire for personal revenge. It was, on the contrary, a judicial vindication of the name of God for which David prayed. This is shown, for example, by Psalm 59:13, where David prays: "Consume them in wrath, consume them, that they may not be: and let them know that God ruleth in Jacob unto the ends of the earth".

Ultimately, then, it was right for the Psalmists to pray for the destruction of the wicked because they were praying for God to do something which it was in harmony with God's nature for him to do, because the act of God which was prayed for conflicted with no actual rights of men, and because the prayers themselves were uttered by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and therefore must have been right.

prayers and could not have been immoral. The total destruction of evil, including the judicial destruction of evil men, is the prerogative of the sovereign God, and it is right not only to pray for the accomplishment of this destruction, but even to assist in effecting it when commanded to do so by God himself.

Scripture teaches that the wages of sin is death,¹² and since every man has sinned, every man is deserving of death, both physical and eternal. Even infants have sinned in Adam, who represented them in the Covenant of Works, and are therefore deserving of eternal death, though they are without actual transgressions. The *Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines murder as "the taking away of our own life, or the life of our neighbour unjustly, or whatsoever tendeth thereunto".¹³ When life is taken away justly, then, it is not murder but execution. Man, of course, does not possess the right to take away the life of his fellow man for every cause. But every man stands before the judgment bar, not only of his fellow men, but of God. Before that divine tribunal he stands guilty, a rebel, an outlaw, wholly without rights. Because he is guilty, he deserves to die. It is appointed unto men once to die,¹⁴ and in the end God brings about the death of every human being. Whether this is done by natural causes or in some other way is immaterial, *so far as the question of God's righteousness is concerned*. Ordinarily, man's death occurs as the result of natural causes, such as disease, accident or old age. At other times, man's death may be caused by murder, that is, by unjust violence on the part of man. Even though man is unjust in committing the murder, God is righteous in permitting it to be committed, for though the person murdered had a civil right to life which should have been respected by his fellow men, he had no moral right to life which he could plead against God. In still other cases, man's death may be caused by lawful violence on the part of man, according to the provision of Genesis 9:6, and in such cases it is not murder but *execution*. The extermination of the Canaanites by the children of Israel, for example, was not

¹² Romans 6:23.

¹³ *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Q. 69.

¹⁴ Hebrews 9:27.

murder but execution, because the persons killed had forfeited all right to life, and because the Israelites were not engaged in an ordinary war of conquest but in a divine program in which they were acting by the specially revealed commands of God for the administration of divine justice.¹⁵

The destruction of the wicked which is prayed for in the Imprecatory Psalms, then, is not murder but execution. These Psalms do not seek the unjust destruction of the life of man; on the contrary they are in essence an appeal to the justice of God and a prayer for that justice to execute sentence upon the wicked. The whole question of the morality of such prayers hinges upon the question of the compatibility of the thing prayed for with the nature of God; and since the prayers were inspired by the Holy Spirit, there need be no doubts on this point. The Imprecatory Psalms, considered as prayers of David and the other Psalmists, must be regarded as free from suspicion of immorality. God is both sovereign and righteous; he possesses the unquestionable right to destroy all evil in his universe; if it is right for God to plan and effect this destruction, then it is also right for the saints to pray for the same.

There remains to be considered the subordinate question whether it is right for Christians to use the Imprecatory Psalms in the worship of God, and if so, in what sense they can make the language of these Psalms their own. It must of course be recognized that inspiration and special revelation ceased with the completion of the documents which form the New Testament. Since that time, the saints have enjoyed illumination by the Spirit of God, but not inspiration or special revelation. It must also be recognized that only by special divine revelation could it be known *with absolute certainty* that a particular person was a reprobate. Beyond doubt many of those who are very wicked persons today will later in their lives be transformed by the grace of God and become saints. God has not revealed who the elect are. It is possible that a person may know concerning himself that he has committed the sin unto death. It is also possible that a Christian may *in certain exceptional cases* be able to judge

¹⁵ Compare Genesis 15:16.

with a high degree of probability whether a particular person has or has not committed that unpardonable sin. But man can never attain infallible knowledge except by divine revelation. The biblical account of the transformation of Saul the persecutor, breathing out threatenings and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord,¹⁶ into Paul the apostle, who could say "to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain",¹⁷ should serve as a warning against all positive assertions that even the wickedest opponents and persecutors of Christianity in our own day are certainly reprobates. While the Psalmists in composing the Imprecatory Psalms undoubtedly had particular persons in mind, and while the apostle Peter speaking by the Holy Spirit quoted a portion of Psalm 109 and declared that it referred to Judas Iscariot,¹⁸ still it remains true that in no way except divine revelation could absolute certainty about the reprobation of a particular person be attained. Consequently if the Imprecatory Psalms are regarded as prayers for the *eternal* doom of wicked persons, no Christian could apply these Psalms to any particular person, or pray other prayers of the nature of the Imprecatory Psalms and offer such petitions to God for the eternal doom of particular persons. To do so would be presumptuous for it would involve a claim to infallibility or special revelation. It is not necessary to state that it would be sinful to pray for the eternal doom of an elect person, even in the case of an elect person who is still living in sin and in rebellion against God. Such prayers can be offered only with reference to the reprobate, never with reference to the elect.

We are, however, by no means warranted in assuming that the Imprecatory Psalms are *necessarily* prayers for the *eternal* doom of the wicked. They may also be regarded as prayers for severe temporal judgments upon the enemies of God. In the case of temporal judgments involving the physical death of wicked persons the eternal doom of those persons would inevitably follow, for the opportunity for repentance would be cut off forever. In such cases the Imprecatory Psalms, even if regarded as prayers for eternal doom, would be applicable because such persons would be the objects of

¹⁶ Acts 9:1.

¹⁷ Philippians 1:21.

¹⁸ Acts 1:16, 20.

divine reprobation. But the Christian could not offer such petitions to God for the physical death of particular persons, because he does not know which wicked persons, in the secret counsel of God, are reprobates and which are included in the election of grace.

The Christian can, indeed, pray for severe temporal judgments upon the enemies of God, but in doing so must leave to God the application of such petitions to particular persons because only God can discern between wicked persons who are the objects of reprobation and wicked persons who are included in the election of grace.

It may be concluded, then, that the Christian can use the Imprecatory Psalms in the worship of God, and can offer them as prayers to God, for temporal judgments short of death upon those enemies of God who in the divine secret counsel are elect persons, and for judgments including physical death and issuing in eternal death upon those enemies of God who in his secret and unrevealed counsel are reprobates. Even the prayer for the death of the wicked person who is a reprobate is not only not immoral but is in itself righteous and is, in fact, included in the pattern of prayer commonly called "The Lord's Prayer" which teaches us to pray: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven".¹⁹ God's kingdom cannot come without Satan's kingdom being destroyed. God's will cannot be done in earth without the destruction of evil. Evil cannot be destroyed without the destruction of men who are permanently identified with it. Instead of being influenced by the sickly sentimentalism of the present day, Christian people should realize that the glory of God demands the destruction of evil. Instead of being insistent upon the assumed, but really non-existent, rights of men, they should focus their attention upon the rights of God. Instead of being ashamed of the Imprecatory Psalms, and attempting to apologize for them and explain them away, Christian people should glory in them and not hesitate to use them in the public and private exercises of the worship of God.

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¹⁹ Matthew 6:10.

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