

Psalm 35 • What is an Imprecatory Psalm?

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As we've been going through the Psalms here, we've been learning a lot about prayer. And somebody might come away from a study, maybe a partial study of the Psalms and think to themselves, gee, the Psalms are really a guidebook on prayer. And they certainly can be that, but they are more, much more than that.

And here's the point that I want to make. They're not always a guidebook on prayer. There are times in the Psalms that they are just purely prophetic from the standpoint of, and you got to understand prophecy is one of those interesting words. Prophecy can refer to things which are spoken ahead of time. In other words, where God prophesies an event that's going to take place, but prophecy doesn't have to mean foretelling an event.

We've said this many times before. The word, prophecy, can simply mean, forth-telling, to declare forth a word from the Lord, or a message from God. It doesn't have to be something that's future. It could be something that's right now, and that yet would be a prophecy. And the Psalms contain that. They contain all kinds of prophetic sort of expressions.

And then we come to Psalms like this. Psalm chapter 35. This is another one of what we call the, Imprecatory Psalms. You're ready to learn a new word tonight? I'll probably going to say it lots of times. Imprecatory. All right? Here's the definition of the word.

Imprecate (im·pre·cate)

Verb **ARCHAIC**

To utter (a curse) or invoke (damage or distress or disaster) against someone or something

It actually comes from the word, imprecate. And it says when I looked it up, it said, it's an archaic word, which means it's no longer used. And yet here we are using it. But the verb, imprecate, means to utter or curse some kind of a damaging thing upon someone's head. Whether it's a distress or a disaster or whatever. To imprecate is to begin to speak thusly. To say, Lord, rain down a curse on this individual.

Well, the verb is very, very, important that we understand because David is applying that whole idea to this psalm. And he's asking God to basically destroy his enemies. And this presents a challenge for Christians because they're like... They read through the Psalms and they're going, is that the way I'm supposed to pray about my enemies? Am I supposed to nuke them, send fire and brimstone and whatever, all else. And is that the way we're supposed to pray?

And the reason that it creates this dilemma for a lot of believers, is because we begin to open up our hearts to the teaching of the New Testament and we begin to understand that we are told explicitly in the Word not to do that. Alright, So, you can see the moral dilemma.

We see these Scriptures, that, where David is literally just calling down curses. And then we get into the New Testament and we read things. Let me show you one of them from Romans chapter 12. Paul writes,

Romans 12:14 (NIV)

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

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Pretty clear, right? "...do not curse." Right? And then we've got the words of Jesus in Matthew chapter 5. Check this one out. He says,

Matthew 5:43-45 (ESV)

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, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

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, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.

And He wants you to act like He acts. That's the point of that. Alright? There's another interesting passage. Well, that doesn't seem to be what David is doing here in this. I mean, we haven't even read the Psalm, but, I'm assuming you've read through these before and you're, wow, that's pretty different!

And then we've got Luke chapter 6 to add to the equation. Once again, Jesus speaking,

Luke 6:27-28 (ESV)

“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, (no we're not calling down curses, we're calling down blessings. Right? And he says,) pray for those who abuse you.”

Here are all these interesting passages in the New Testament that really create this conundrum in our hearts and minds when we get to Psalms like this in chapter 35, and we see that David is calling down curses on his enemies.

Well, you have to know that throughout the years, Bible scholars and teachers have tried to come up with all kinds of reasons for the existence of the Imprecatory Psalms. Because they got to explain it. Or they got to figure out some way to work out the contradiction. I'll put some of these up actually on the screen so you can see them.

1) Some say that these words were not inspired by God.

The first reason that people give: **Some say that these words were not inspired by God** and that's how they explain it away. They just say, well, here's the deal. The Imprecatory Psalm where David is calling down curses on his enemies are obviously not inspired by the Lord because clearly Jesus tells us not to do that in the New Testament. So, you have an example here of an unhinged man who's just really angry. And he's writing all these things down but this is really not inspired by the Holy Spirit.

I don't know. What would you say if somebody said that to you? You know what my response would be? I'd say, well, that's interesting. Where exactly does that end? That whole idea of, I guess that's not part of God's Word.

You see, I was raised to believe, well, not to, I was... I don't think I ever believed it actually. But I was actually taught as a young boy growing up that the Bible is something you have to read with discernment. There are some parts of it that are from God and there are some parts of it that are just simply the writings of men.

And you have to be smart enough, which of course puts you in the driver's seat And you can say, well, that's of God, that's not, that's of God. Adultery, that's of men. And then... And all these other little things I can just pick and choose, right, and decide what I want to believe is from God. And that's the problem with basically saying at some point that this is not the inspired Word of God. Pretty soon I'm sitting in judgment on it. And I'm making the determination to believe what's comfortable and to disbelieve what's uncomfortable. You can see that - that's a slippery slope.

Here's the second reason that some guys try to explain this away.

- 1) Some say that these words were not inspired by God.
- 2) Some say that they were aimed at the Devil, not at people.

They'll say, **Some say that these statements were aimed at the Devil, and not at people.** Except in one particular Imprecatory Psalm, the person being cursed is mentioned by name. Doeg the Edomite, who was a particularly nasty fellow. And if you read through the Scriptures, you probably recognize that name. Don't ever name your kids Doeg. It's not going to go well.

And you can see that David is speaking about people when he makes reference in these Imprecatory Psalms about these curses that he's calling down in the name of the Lord. That one just frankly just doesn't satisfy.

Number 3,

- 1) Some say that these words were not inspired by God.
- 2) Some say that they were aimed at the Devil, not at people.
- 3) Some chalk it up to the difference between Law and Grace.

This is interesting. **Some people chalk it up to the difference between Law and Grace.** And they'll say, well, in the Old Testament, God was just angry. He was just... He didn't have a good day. And He was just nuking people all over the place. But then you get into the New Testament and now you got grace and peace and forgiveness. But the Old Testament, you got the ground opening up and swallowing people whole.

Do you know that there are people who have seen such a, or they believe they see such a vast difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of

the New. Some people have postulated that it's two different gods, which is ridiculous.

But this whole idea that the law, which is essentially the essence of what we read about in the Old Testament, is very harsh and demanding. And in the New Testament we have grace, which is easy and light and airy and forgiving and so forth, has led people to say that the Imprecatory Psalms are just part of what you deal with as it relates to the Old Testament.

Again the problem with that position is that frankly, and we've seen this in our study of the Old Testament, some of the most wonderful expressions of God's mercy are found in the Old Testament. Some of the most wonderful expressions of His loving forgiveness and grace are found in the Old Testament. And, you have the problem of curses in the New Testament.

Do you guys remember? I won't make you turn there, but here's a couple examples. Matthew chapter 11; Jesus is walking through the area and He begins to curse Capernaum. And He says, O, Capernaum, are you going to be lifted up into the skies? No! He says, I tell you, Sodom and Gomorrah would have repented in ashes and sackcloth if the miracles would have been done in them that were done in you. He says, they will rise up at the last day and they will condemn you. (Matthew 11:23-24) And that's in the New Testament

And, there's more. We have Paul's prayer of outrage against the false teachers in the book of Galatians. (Galatians 1:6-9) Remember, he said, may they be cursed, he said. He said, let me say it, I'll say it, and I'll say it again. If anyone teaches a gospel other than the one you received, let him be eternally condemned. That's in the New Testament. See, we forget that stuff sometimes.

And then we have Paul's denunciation in his letter to Timothy of Alexander the Coppersmith, who did Paul a great deal of damage. (2 Timothy 4:14) And Paul mentions it and he's basically says, he's going to... He says, may the Lord repay him according to his deeds. Well, that's to implicate... That's to speak that word of judgment.

And then finally you guys, remember probably in Revelation chapter 6, we hear, or John, I guess, is allowed to hear the voices of the martyrs coming from beneath the altar who are crying out for judgment against those who took their natural lives while they were upon the earth. (Revelations 6:9) And they're crying out and they're saying, Lord, when are you going to avenge us? And that's in the New Testament.

So, you can see that this whole idea that, well, that's just part of the Old Testament, that just doesn't fly. It just doesn't fly.

The fourth thing, that some people try to use to explain it is,

- 1) Some say that these words were not inspired by God.
- 2) Some say that they were aimed at the Devil, not at people.
- 3) Some chalk it up to the difference between Law and Grace.
- 4) Some say these Psalms are examples of what NOT to pray.

Some say that the Psalms are examples of what NOT to pray. You just read through the Psalms and you'll learn all the things you should never say. Well there's a problem with that too. And that is that not only are the Psalms greatly quoted in the New Testament, but the Imprecatory Psalms are quoted in the New Testament by New Testament writers who were not embarrassed by what those Psalms said and had no problem quoting them.

Peter quoted an Imprecatory Psalm when he talked about the judgment of Judas the betrayer. And the apostle Paul quotes an Imprecatory Psalm in Romans chapter 11 when he's speaking about the hard heartedness of the Jewish people and the judgment that will come upon them because of their rebellion. (Romans 11:7-10) So, you see, these guys quoted the Imprecatory Psalms as examples. We can't say that these are examples of what not to pray.

And then here's the last one that I'll list for you and there are probably are more.

- 1) Some say that these words were not inspired by God.
- 2) Some say that they were aimed at the Devil, not at people.
- 3) Some chalk it up to the difference between Law and Grace.
- 4) Some say these Psalms are examples of what NOT to pray.
- 5) Some use these Psalms as justification for cursing their enemies.

But some actually use these Psalms as justification for cursing their enemies. And I know this for a fact because I had someone do it to me once. Not to me, but in a conversation.

I was talking to an individual who was very bitter towards someone in their life. And they were telling me how they were praying the prayer of David, that he prayed against his enemies. And they were praying it against this individual. And I came back and I said, what about what Jesus said? Didn't... Just went right over the head. And, no, it says it right there in the Psalms! God, break their teeth! And do all these other things.

And I know that there are people who just simply ignore the command of Jesus to "*love our enemies*" and they just go on and assume that this is an example for them.

What is our position about the Imprecatory Psalms? I mean, again, it creates a challenge from the standpoint of harmonizing these sorts of very harsh words with the words of Jesus telling you and I to "love our enemies, pray for those who persecute us, and bless and do not curse."

Well, first of all, we have to believe that it's all part of God's Word. We can't create a doctrine of convenience and just say, well, this is God's Word and this isn't. It is all God's Word and it is inspired by the Holy Spirit. And it is authoritative. So, where do we go from there because that still doesn't solve our problem. How should we embrace these Psalms in the light of the New Testament?

Well, quite simply, first of all, we have to remember who wrote them and we have to remember how they were written. All right? And as far as who wrote these psalms, and it was David, but it wasn't just David. There are some Imprecatory Psalms that are written by some other individuals. The sons of Asaph and so forth. And we have to understand something about these men. And it applies to anybody who wrote Holy Scripture. And that is, that these individuals were being used by the Holy Spirit to write what God wanted them to write. Okay? What God wanted them to say.

Let me show you an example. Here's how Peter explains it. He says,

2 Peter 1:21 (ESV)

...no prophecy that was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

...no prophecy that was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

And let me explain too, that any Scripture that is inspired by the Holy Spirit is essentially considered prophetic. Because again, it is speaking the Word of the Lord. The Holy Spirit is behind it, inspiring it to be spoken, and in that sense, it is prophetic.

Peter says very clearly here, that it was not produced by the will of man, rather it was produced through the Holy Spirit as men were carried along. And then Paul reminds Timothy in this following passage something that we all need to remember and that is that,

2 Timothy 3:16 (ESV)

All Scripture is breathed out by God...

All Scripture (it) is breathed out by God...

Here's what we're learning about these Psalms. These Psalms are not an example of how we are to pray. Right? They are inspired judgments. They are inspired declarations of judgment from the Lord, who is the judge of all the earth. And what we're seeing here is the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to move upon men to speak judgment against the enemies of the Lord. It is a glimpse into the holiness of God and His hatred for sin at all times.

And it is He who is able to judge men fairly and able to judge at all. You and I are not. We're not called to judge. There's a place for that. Good grief, even Jesus didn't come to condemn, He said. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save it. (John 3:17)

And honestly, there is no place in the Christian life for personal vengeance or for cursing another person. Because what is happening in the Imprecatory Psalms is the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to speak forth these words of judgment. Our calling, as we've mentioned before, when it comes to dealing with our enemies, is to pray for them. Is to pray, to pray for them.

Now, what about evil and all the things that are going on in this world? Are we saying that we shouldn't pray about evil that's happening in the world, or things that are going on in the world like wickedness and stuff like that? Obviously, we're not saying that at all. There's nothing wrong at all with asking the Lord to tear down the strongholds of the enemy. That's... You see what I'm saying?

We're asking Him to do that work. But we're asking Him to tear down the work of the enemy. Right?

We're not specifically calling down judgment upon an individual. We're praying that God would neutralize the efforts of the evil one. And, of course, those efforts are so wide ranging. You've got the false cults, the false religions, the world ideologies that people are just glomming on to.

And we can pray, and we can say, Lord, break down the barriers, break down the strongholds of these things in people's hearts and in their minds. Loose them from the power of this, mind controlling sort of stuff, that is just... and so forth. You got to remember that Jesus taught you and I to pray as a regular part of our prayer, He taught us to pray, Your kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (Luke 11:1)

As I was thinking about that today, I thought, I could sit and meditate on that one simple petition for a long time. Have you ever stopped to think about what you're being encouraged to pray when you pray that part of what we call, The Lord's Prayer? It's really the disciples prayer. It's our prayer. Your kingdom come. Your kingdom come. We're praying for God's kingdom to be established and to actually overthrow the kingdom of the enemy. That's what we're praying.

That's a prayer of spiritual warfare you guys. Your kingdom come, YOUR will be done here on earth as we know that it is done in heaven. Bring Your will to bear upon this situation. We're calling out for the Lord to change things. That, frankly, that's one of the most comforting prayers that I pray when people are going through difficult times or whatever. I just...

Sometimes I don't exactly know how to pray. I just say, Lord, just let Your will be done! Let Your kingdom move powerfully in the midst of this situation. And let Your will be done here on earth in this matter here, even as it is done in heaven.

It's a wonderful, but yet powerful prayer request for spiritual warfare that doesn't deal directly with calling down curses on people. We're asking God to overthrow principalities and powers, rulers and established elements of evil that are rotting our culture at the core. And that's what we ought to be doing. We're the salt of the earth. We're the light of the world. We should be praying.

I have said this before and I'm going to say it again. When we stand before God and when we hear the trumpet and we meet the Lord in the air; or rise to meet Him from the grave, whichever comes first for you and I. And we are before the

Lord, I'm telling you right now, one of the biggest laments of born again Christians will be the lack of prayer. Lack of time they spent on their knees, crying out to God for His kingdom to come and for His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven."

And I think that we're going to... The Bible says, we're going to see as we... And we're going to know as we are known. (1 Corinthians 13:12) And God knows, the Bible says, God knows me perfectly, even to the number of hairs on my head. I'm going to know as I am known at that time. And that means I'm going to know a lot and so are you. And we're going to know just exactly how impotent the church has been over the course of its time on this earth because of a lack of prayer. A lack of calling out to the Lord.

There's all kinds of things we can pray and should pray. When we see evil going on in this world, we're to pray for the individuals who are caught up in that evil. We're even to pray for the people who are perpetrating that evil. We're to pray for them, that they would be delivered. Right? But then we are to pray that God would abolish that evil. That He would break down those strongholds of the enemy and bring His kingdom to bear upon those situations.

All right. You'll notice we haven't even gotten into the Psalms yet. I really felt the need to really lay this out as an introduction to this psalm because this isn't really the first Psalm that contains these Imprecatory statements. But it is probably one of the first Psalms that is almost wholly Imprecatory. There's very little petition here at all in the sense of David asking for things for himself, Although he does do that here, but it's mostly, as you'll see, calling the Lord to this judgment. And again, this is through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Verse 1 of Psalm chapter 35, David says,

"Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me!" (ESV)

And the word, contend, literally means, litigate. It's the... We could translate it that way, litigate O Lord, with those who litigate. He's calling the Lord to be the judge. Right? To be the judge and to judge the situation for what it is.

He says in verse 2; now you'll notice here, he doesn't say, stretch out your hand of mercy. In verse two, he says,

"Take hold of shield and buckler (and those are the implements of warfare and he says,) and rise for my help!"

3 Draw the spear and the javelin against my pursuers! Say to my soul, "I am your salvation!"

Now, again, this is through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as David is speaking these words of judgment. And this is God's, heart ultimately toward His people. This is what God will do ultimately. You and I will see this. We will witness this with our own eyes. We will witness the judgment of the Lord. We will witness the Lord rising up and abolishing evil. We'll see it. We will watch it happen.

So, David is also speaking prophetically here. He says in verse 4,

"Let them be put to shame and dishonor (who seek after my life) Let them be turned back and disappointed who devise evil against me!"

5 Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them away!

6 Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the LORD pursuing them!

7 For without cause they hid their net for me; without cause they dug a pit for my life.

8 Let destruction come upon him when he does not know it! And let the net that he hid ensnare him; let him fall into it-to his own destruction!"

You read these verses and you think, man, I wish I could pray that prayer sometimes. I mean, when somebody has... Okay, I want to be careful not to get too graphic here. But we live in pretty incredible peace.

But can you imagine how the saints of the past, in fact, some of the saints of even the present in other parts of the world, may be tempted to pray this very prayer. Those who have had their nation ransacked by a marauding enemy. They've seen their children slaughtered before their very eyes. They've seen their wives raped before their very eyes. They've seen people, armies come in and literally take everything they own. Huge temptation, right? Huge temptation to speak these words over your enemy.

Because you see, for you and I, it comes from a heart of revenge. We don't... That whole thing about righteous indignation, I believe that it exists. I don't think I've probably ever felt it. I'm not sure I have. I don't consider myself that

pure. When I want God to do something bad for somebody, it's because of my desire for revenge.

But you see, I am told to not carry that in my heart. I'm told not to carry a desire for revenge in my heart. And the reason is, I can't handle it. I can't handle it. It'll kill me. It will literally turn my life dark. It will take every fruit of the Holy Spirit and squeeze it right out of my life to the point where I am just given over to the flesh.

Because you see, vengeance and anger and bitterness are works of the flesh. And when we give in to them... Wow! That can be a real difficult road to go down. But a pretty easy one, frankly. Difficult because of what it produces in our life. Easy to go down from the standpoint that of just choosing to go down it. Oh yeah, my flesh wants to go there.

Why do you think we love these movies where we watch this protracted evil taking place. And then we see, the hero come in toward the end of the movie with guns blazing, just, wiping the floor with the enemy. And we're all just inside going, yeah! It's in us. It's in my flesh to want to see satisfaction for those who have hurt me and hurt those I love. It's just in me. It's...

But it's not a righteous thing. It's an unrighteous thing. It's a fleshly thing, you see. God can do this. I can't. So, he says, "*Vengeance is mine...'* says the Lord." (Deuteronomy 32:35) It belongs to Me. Leave it with Me. It's Mine to do.

God's Word even tells me that I have to be careful when I see my enemy fall, that I don't gloat over it. Scripture is very clear about that as well. When I see something bad happen to my enemy, I have to be careful to not go, yes! Because the Bible says, God will turn His anger away from my enemy and turn it on to me. (Proverbs 24:17-18) That's... See, God knows my heart and He knows your heart, too. We can't go there. We can't go here. (Pointing to the text of the Psalm)

That's why this is not an example. This particular, the Imprecatory Psalms are not an example of what to pray. It is a glimpse into the holiness of God, Who cannot abide the sin of mankind and Who will judge it as the judge of all the earth. But it's not where you and I can go. We'll get lost there.

He says in verse 9,

"Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD, exulting in his salvation. (And I believe that we will do that, when we see the Lord's judgment one day.)"

10 All my bones shall say, "O LORD, who is like you, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, the poor and needy from him who robs him?"

And then he goes on to talk about more of what's been going on. He says,

"11 Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know.

12 They repay me evil for good; (He says,) my soul is bereft."

That's an interesting word, it means to be made, desolate. My soul has been made desolate, like a wilderness where there's no water.

He says,

"13 But I, when they were sick- I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting; I prayed with head bowed (down) on my chest.

14 I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother; as one who laments his mother, I bowed down in mourning.

15 But at my stumbling they rejoiced and gathered; they gathered together against me; wretches whom I did not know tore at me without ceasing;

16 like profane mockers at a feast, they gnash at me with their teeth.

17 How long, O LORD, will you look on? Rescue me from their destruction, my precious life from the lions!

18 I will thank you in the great congregation; in the mighty throng I will praise you.

19 Let not those rejoice over me who are wrongfully my foes, and let not those wink the eye who hate me without cause.

20 For they do not speak peace, but against those who are quiet in the land they devise words of deceit.

21 They open wide their mouths against me; they say, "Aha, Aha! Our eyes have seen it!"

22 You have seen, O LORD; be not silent! O LORD, be not far from me!

23 Awake and rouse yourself for my vindication, for my cause, my God and my LORD!

24 Vindicate me, O LORD, my God, according to your righteousness, and let them not rejoice over me!

25 Let them not say in their hearts, "Aha, our heart's desire!" Let them not say, "We have swallowed him up."

26 Let them be put to shame and disappointed altogether who rejoice at my calamity! Let them be clothed with shame and dishonor who magnify themselves against me!

27 Let those who delight in my righteousness shout for joy and be glad and say evermore, "Great is the LORD, who delights in the welfare of his servant!"

28 Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long."

Isn't that a wonderful Psalm.