

## The Poetry of Life The Imprecatory Psalms

### *What are the Imprecatory Psalms?*

These Psalms can also be referred to as Psalms of Wrath or Psalms of Anger, but they are basically a group of psalms in the collection that contain curses on the psalmists' enemies (the word "imprecations" means "curses"). Quite frankly, this causes a problem for many Christians, for we have in the Bible people praying that their enemies would become ill, lose everything they have, be killed, and even have their children harmed. This does not sit well with those of us who have been taught by Jesus to turn the other cheek and pray for our enemies.

The honesty of these psalms can not be questioned, however. The fact that they are in the Bible forces us to wrestle with what they say. Is it right for us to pray for the demise of those who have harmed us (or those close to us)? How are we to make room for God's justice? Should we actually hope harmful people are harmed for what they have done? These, and many other related questions, are often debated by Christians discussing these psalms.

### *How many Imprecatory Psalms are there?*

It is not a large section of the Psalter, but those carrying the theme include:

-35, 55, 59, 69, 79, 109, 137 (35, 69, 109 being the most intense)

### **Poor Solutions**

Many solutions have been offered concerning these Psalms, you might have some running through your head right now. While there are many poor solutions to understanding these psalms, a couple of the most popular are:

- *The OT contains an inferior ethic*-Some say that it was okay for OT people to curse their enemies but not okay for NT Christians. However the OT has plenty of instruction about loving others and even helping your enemies (cf. Exodus 23:4-5)
- *Representative of Human Injustice*-While this takes the wording and feeling of these psalms quite seriously, it tries to make the psalms into general laments from mankind about injustice. This denies the personal nature of these psalms, and forgets to take into account that Jesus' way does ask for evil on our enemies, but instructs us to love and pray for our enemies.

### **More Helpful Answers**

- The simple fact of the matter is that these psalms force us to look deep within ourselves, questioning the very nature of our forgiveness of those who have wronged us, as well as question our ability to love as Jesus loved (who looked down from the cross at his mockers and crucifiers and prayed, "Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing.")
- The Psalmist's Call for Justice-You will note that the authors do not plan on fighting back themselves, but recognize that justice (and thus vengeance) belongs to God. Their prayer is that God would contend with those who have brought harm to them and their people, they are not personally planning to do harm themselves. We must all put at the cross our desires for revenge and vengeance, God will do it in His time.
- The authors recognize that the harm done them is sin and rebellion against God. They are praying that God would be honored in their enemies' lives, even if it takes God's discipline on them. This may seem harsh, but the alternative is the absence of moral outrage against evil, a situation that demonstrates a lack of righteousness and morality in our own lives.

While the hard words of these psalms will still leave us uncomfortable at times, they do teach us that we can be completely honest with God in our prayers. He already knows our thoughts, why not speak this pain in our life to Him and pray for the ability to forgive and even love our enemies? To live a life of 'sanitized' faith is more damaging to our relationship to God than pure honesty, even if our hearts aren't always in the right place.