

What are we supposed to do with these awful psalms? These imprecatory, or cursing psalms which cry out for divine vengeance, appealing to God to pour out his wrath on his enemies

According to the New Testament, believers are to love their enemies (Matt 5:44), to "bless and not curse" (Rom 12:14). It seems difficult to reconcile these psalms with this New Testament teaching. Naturally these psalms evoke a reaction of revulsion in many of us.

So can we just ignore them? Consign them to some kind of vault where we put the bits of scripture we don't like? Can we just say "O well that's the Old Testament, it has nothing to do with us?"

I'd like to but I'm not sure we can.

2 Timothy 3:16 tells us that all scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness

And the New Testament shows us that the psalms are really important to the life of Christians. The Book of Psalms is one of the very most quoted books in the New Testament. The Apostles were clearly thoroughly conversant with the Book of Psalms and saw no distance between the life of a Christian and the life of the psalmist. So, to sort of split the people of

God into two halves in a way that would make the psalms irrelevant for New Testament Christians is not to follow the example of the Apostles at all. So, we're encouraged by the New Testament to know the Psalms to regard them as ours as Christians. That's all easy to say until you come to the problem of these awful imprecatory psalms.

So what are we to think about them? Is it appropriate for Christians to pray for God to curse their enemies?

Part of the answer is, well, not all the time. Not a lot of the time. We need to kind of follow the balance of the Psalms. The Psalms don't curse enemies all the time either. Another way to think about it is to say that we never curse **our** enemies. We curse **God's** enemies. And that was true in the Old Testament, as well as the New Testament. God's people in the Old Testament were not encouraged just randomly to curse people. The imprecations of the Psalms are directed against the enemies of God and His purposes, and of His people.

In the New Testament Paul calls for a curse on anyone who does not love Christ (1 Cor 16:22) and who preaches a false Gospel (Gal 1:8, 9). He calls for justice against his and God's enemies, knowing that vengeance belongs to the Lord and that he will repay (2 Tim 4:22). John, the apostle, carries the message of the martyrs calling from the grave for retribution (Rev 6:10)

Paul also admonishes the believers saying, "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is

written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (Rom 12:19).

And I think Paul says in Romans, after all, that we love our enemies so that in the final judgment, more coals will be heaped on their heads. So, the loving of the enemy is not the elimination of judgment to come. Loving the enemy is not eliminating the reality that justice has to be maintained in the world. And when you think about it, even prayers that we don't think of as imprecations, contain imprecations. When we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus," that obviously is a prayer that He would come to bless His people, that He come to save His people, that He would come to make all things new.

But in the process of His coming, there will also be judgment on the wicked. And in that sense, contained in the prayer, implicitly, "Come, Lord Jesus" is an imprecation on the wicked. So, we have to think about all of that.

So, as difficult as this is, and I don't want to minimize the difficulty, it is a prayer for thorough judgment on the wicked, so that the righteous will be protected. So that justice can be done. We have to be sure we don't become so sentimental

about the love and mercy of God that we cannot sustain our hope.

Our hope is huge. And it can only be sustained by two mighty pillars of faith.

One pillar is the truth of God's love and mercy. For God so loves the world, the whole world, that he is at work reconciling all things to himself in Christ. That it is God's will that all will know him and love him. That nobody and no situation is so broken and damaged that God will abandon us. That he promises forgiveness to all those who truly repent and trust that the cross of Christ has once and for all dealt with our sin. Our hope cannot hold up without the strength of this pillar. But this pillar alone cannot sustain our hope, because there must be justice too!

The other pillar is our trust that God will make all things right. Our trust in God's righteousness and what he has promised to do. We must remember that imprecations are nothing more than human prayers based on divine promises. One is simply asking God to do what he has already said he will do (often repeatedly throughout the Psalms themselves). For example, in Matthew 7:23 Jesus declares that on the day of judgment he

will say to hypocrites, “I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.” Is it wrong for us to pray that Jesus do precisely that? Is it wrong for us to build a prayer on a promise? “Oh, Lord, cause those to depart from you who do evil,” appears to be a perfectly legitimate petition. Its also important to remember that imprecations are expressions provoked by the horror of sin. The psalmist prayed this way because of his deep sensitivity to the ugliness of evil. Perhaps the chief reason why he wasn’t bothered by prayers of imprecation and we are is that he was bothered by sin and we aren’t! It is frightening to think that we can stand in the presence of evil and not be moved to pray as the psalmist did.

Our hope depends on it.

For those of us who like their psalms tied with a neat bow (I think I may be one!) notice that the psalmist doesn’t stop with wrath and judgement, he comes back to God. That’s right thinking. The same God he’s been petitioning for wrath on the enemy, he praises once more. He places the problem in God’s hands and says ‘help me, save me...let them know that You have done it’