

PURPOSE

Today's Study Guide will look a bit different from my other ones. I will still offer verse-by-verse commentary of the second half of the Psalm, but the confusion about cursing one's enemies—in light of the Sermon on the Mount—merits extra exploration. In the "Introduction", I reflect on (1) primary interpretations of the imprecatory psalms, (2) essential qualifiers for interpreting the imprecatory psalms, (3) reasons we must apply the imprecatory psalms differently than in OT times, and (4) how we can apply the imprecatory psalms today. Please note that my favorite Old Testament scholar, Bruce Waltke, greatly influenced my meditations on this subject.

This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

PSALM 69:1-36 ESV

1 To the choirmaster: according to Lilies. Of David. Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. 2 I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. 3 I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. 4 More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause; mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me with lies. What I did not steal must I now restore? 5 O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you. 6 Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, O Lord GOD of hosts; let not those who seek you be brought to dishonor through me, O God of Israel. 7 For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. 8 I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons. 9 For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me. 10 When I wept and humbled my soul with fasting, it became my reproach. 11 When I made sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them. 12 I am the talk of those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me. 13 But as for me, my prayer is to you, O LORD. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of your steadfast love answer me in your saving faithfulness. 14 Deliver me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters. 15 Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me. 16 Answer me, O LORD, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me. 17 Hide not your face from your servant, for I am in distress; make haste to answer me. 18 Draw near to my soul, redeem me; ransom me because of my enemies! 19 You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to you. 20 Reproaches have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. 21 They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink. 22 Let their own table before them become a snare; and when they are at peace, let it become a trap. 23 Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see, and make their loins tremble continually. 24 Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them. 25 May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents. 26 For they persecute him whom you have struck down, and they recount the pain of those you have wounded. 27 Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal from you. 28 Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous. 29 But I am afflicted and in pain; let your salvation, O God, set me on high! 30 I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. 31 This will please the LORD more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs. 32 When the humble see it they will be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. 33 For the LORD hears the needy and does not despise his own people who are prisoners. 34 Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them. 35 For God will save Zion and build up the cities of Judah, and people shall dwell there and possess it; 36 the offspring of his servants shall inherit it, and those who love his name shall dwell in it.

INTRODUCTION:

Thoughts on Imprecatory Psalms

The "imprecatory psalms" earn their label due to the "imprecations"—curses—called down upon Israel's foes. If the label suggests vindictiveness, then it is a misnomer. The imprecatory psalms are not spiteful or petty; rather, they are prayers for the God of justice to vindicate His righteousness by condemning oppressors.

Four Primary Interpretations:

- 1) **The imprecatory psalms are not prayers but prophecies.** In other words, the psalmists are not wishing harm upon their enemies but predicting it. The Hebrew language is flexible, often blurring the line between

"May God pour out wrath upon His enemies" and "God will pour out wrath upon His enemies." Nevertheless, some imprecations are so clear, and the language in those instances so inflexible that the explanation falls short.

- 2) **The imprecatory psalms were sinful.** CS Lewis labels the imprecatory psalms "devilish." But how can Scripture be "devilish" and "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16) at the same time? Any solution that suggests Psalmists sinned by what they wrote—and taught Israel to sing—must be discarded.
- 3) **The imprecatory psalms model how to pray against our enemies.** In some ways, this is true. For instance, "break the arm of the wicked" (Ps. 10:15) does not mean "sever their bone"—as if the Psalmist envisioned torture—but rather "break their strength." What a wise prayer against oppression! Not all imprecatory psalms stop there, however. Psalm 109 requests that the children of one's enemies become starving orphans (vv. 9-10) who never have families (v. 13). He openly prays that "curses come upon him" (v. 17). Can this possibly square with Jesus' command to "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44) or Paul's command to "bless your enemies; bless and do not curse" (Rom. 12:14)? I can't bring myself to agree with those who claim these are compatible ways to pray. It appears that something changed in the first century when both Jesus and Stephen prayed for their enemies (Luke 23:34; Acts 7:60).
- 4) **The imprecatory psalms are profitable for our souls, but we must apply them differently in light of the gospel.** This one requires some unpacking. See below.

Seven Qualifiers for Interpretation:

First, we must acknowledge that some kinds of imprecation are acceptable. In Matthew 6:10, Jesus encourages us to pray for God's kingdom to come, which naturally includes final judgment. In Luke 18:1-8, Jesus exhorts us to cry out day and night for God's justice. In 1 Corinthians 16:22, Paul pronounces a curse upon all who fail to love Jesus. In Revelation 6:10, martyrs in heaven ask God how long He will delay avenging their blood before the final crackdown. Each of the above scenarios reveals that some level of imprecation is acceptable. What is common to each of them, however, is that they all reference Christ's return and implied judgment, directly or indirectly. When we discuss the application, we will elaborate on how our assurance of a final reckoning affects our interpretation of imprecatory psalms.

Second, before we criticize the psalmists too sharply, we must step into their shoes. As Derek Kidner says, "The passages on which we may be tempted to sit in judgment have the shocking immediacy of a scream, to startle us into feeling something of the desperation that produced them." Unless we have experienced the rape, torture, and murder of our family members, we do well *not* to assume the role of armchair quarterback. We can't expect victims of tragedy to compose themselves, nor should we. These psalms model the way God wishes to relate to us. He doesn't want the prim-and-proper *you*, dressed up in a bow. He wants the real you—raw, earthy, and unadorned. Our prayer life should reflect this.

Third, the imprecatory psalms model the moral indignation we should feel and often don't. In the words of R.W. Dale, "It is partly because sin does not provoke our own wrath, that we do not believe that sin provokes the wrath of God." We cannot passionately love God without passionately opposing evil. C.S. Lewis remarks on the uniqueness of the Psalms in this regard:

"Such expressions are lacking in pagan literature... [because] the Jews had firmer grasp on right and wrong... If we are to excuse the poets of the Psalms on the grounds that they were not Christians, we ought to be able to point to the same sort of thing and worse in pagan authors... I can find in them lasciviousness, much brutal, insensibility, cold cruelties taken for granted, but not this fury or luxury of hatred. One's first impression is that the Jews were much more vindictive and vitriolic than the pagans."

It's true that Jewish literature was more "vindictive and vitriolic" than that of the pagans—but why? Because the pagans had no morals. They glorified sex and violence, not righteousness. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? A society that tolerates everything but holiness is wicked indeed. Our lack of moral outrage reveals not health but sickness.

Fourth, the imprecatory psalms exhibit faith. Unlike the "self-avenger" of Psalm 8:2, David entrusts vengeance to God and seeks it on behalf of all God's people. In other words, David seeks vengeance not *by* himself or *for* himself

(alone) but rather *by* God and *for* God's people. On that note, David displays tremendous grace toward Saul, who often sought to kill him and whom David repeatedly spared.

Fifth, the imprecatory psalms were conditional. As noted below, Jeremiah 18:7-10 teaches that anyone who repents will evade prophetically pronounced curses. Paul's quotation in Romans 11:9-10 of Psalm 69:22-23 assumes this. After linking the curse to unrepentant Jews, Paul immediately holds out hope that the Jews will repent and experience blessing. Every curse uttered by a Psalmist assumed persistent rebellion against God. To cease rebelling is to sidestep the curse. The curses were conditional.

Sixth, Paul's quotation in Romans 11:9-10 validates that the imprecatory psalms belong to holy Scripture in just the same manner as any other God-breathed jot or tittle. Other imprecations quoted in the New Testament occur in Acts 1:20, which references Pss. 69:25 and 109:8.

Seventh, the imprecatory psalms are theocentric. That is, they focus on God's glory and fame. By judging the wicked and vindicating the righteous, God manifests His glory. Psalm 83:17-18: *"Let them be put to shame and dismayed forever; let them perish in disgrace, that they may know that you alone, whose name is the LORD, are the Most High over all the earth."* When God punished the wicked and vindicated the righteous, Israel would shine like a light to the nations.

Despite these qualifiers, for the following reasons, we cannot apply imprecatory psalms in precisely the same way that ancient Israelites did.

Three Reasons We Must Apply the Imprecatory Psalms Differently than in OT times:

Reason #1: We have a clearer understanding of final judgment.

The New Testament teaches that there is an afterlife, and the wicked will pay a stern penalty, which Christ will enforce upon His return. The Old Testament teaches this clearly in Daniel 12:2 and a few other passages, but Jews of David's time were mostly ignorant of a final day of reckoning and afterlife. Imagine a world where you witness wealthy, comfortable oppressors dying at a good old age while the righteous are killed in their prime. Of course, this happens today, but we at least have confidence that Jesus will return to set it all right. The Psalmists knew this hazily, if at all. Without the confidence of an eschatological day of reckoning, Psalmists cried out to see judgment *in this life*. The New Testament, in contrast, zooms in on the final judgment. We need not feel the same urgency for justice because we know God will pay back evil perfectly, even if they escape justice in this life (cf. 1 Tim. 5:24).

Reason #2: We live in the year of the Lord's favor.

When Jesus preached in Nazareth, He opened the scroll to Isaiah 61, read a portion, and said, "Today, this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). Interestingly, Jesus finished His reading of Isaiah 61 by cutting off a verse, mid-sentence. The part He cut out is instructive.

The verse says that God's Spirit rested upon the Messiah "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God" (Isa. 61:2). A year of favor; a day of vengeance. A long stretch of grace but a brief, decisive, judgment. Jesus affirmed that the age of grace had been fulfilled in His earthly ministry, but He left off the part about vengeance. Why? Because that part had not been "fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus inaugurated a new age. If we feel any urgency, it should not be toward vengeance, like the Psalmists. They did not live in the era of glad tidings. We do. If anything, we should feel urgency to proclaim—and practice—forgiveness.

Reason #3: We comprise the multinational church, not the theocratic nation of Israel.

God commanded Israel to vanquish her enemies. Bruce Waltke remarks, "The earthly king asks no more from the heavenly king than the latter asked of him. That is, God told the king to deliver the oppressed and punish the oppressor. The king is asking no more of God than God asked of him."

But now the situation has changed. God no longer commands us to establish His kingdom by supplanting human enemies. In that former era, it was only sensible for Israel to pray for victory over oppressive regimes. Now, however, the church—what Peter calls a "holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9)—is multinational. God's "portion" is no longer just Israel but all nations (cf. Deut. 32:8-9; Matt. 28:18). The "weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy [demonic] strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4). In this new gospel era, God has more clearly distinguished between church and state. God entrusts vengeance to the state—"an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:4). To the church, He assigns "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18).

Seven Ways We Can Apply the Imprecatory Psalms Today:

- 1) **Pray for justice.** Do this in a way that focuses not on personal vengeance but on stopping the oppressor and comforting the oppressed.
- 2) **Pray with raw emotion.** Don't dress up your prayers. Dress them down. God wants a friendship with the real you, not the "you" you think you should be.
- 3) **Pray for moral indignation.** Most of us have been desensitized by the immoral air we breathe. We are outraged by slow service at a restaurant but not the oppression of the poor (of which we are too often ignorant), like the Psalmists.
- 4) **Pray the imprecatory psalms against your spiritual enemies.** The New Testament provides greater insight into "the enemy behind the enemy." Since God will never save fallen angels (2 Pet. 2:4; Heb. 2:16), it is safe to pray for God to crush them beneath our feet (cf. Rom. 16:20).
- 5) **Leave room for God's wrath.** If the Psalmists actively pleaded for God to pour out judgment, the New Testament commands us to passively leave space for it (Rom. 12:19). We do this by refusing to avenge, forgiving our enemies, and waiting for God to enforce perfect justice.
- 6) **Proclaim the good news.** A new day has dawned since Psalmists pronounced curses on their enemies. Because of Jesus, we live in the age of glad tidings. We should proclaim grace as urgently as the Psalmists pronounced judgment.
- 7) **Study the imprecatory psalms.** They are just as profitable for our souls as any other portion of the Bible. Like all Scripture, however, we must read it in light of the age in which we live. Just like we don't sacrifice bulls and goats because of Jesus, neither should we curse our enemies because of Jesus. Nevertheless, glean much from the "cursing psalms."

In conclusion, the imprecatory psalms are profitable for doctrine, but we must apply them differently in light of the gospel.

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

19 You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to you. 20 Reproaches have broken my heart, so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none.

—"You know":

- These opening words emphasize God's intimate knowledge of David's public disgrace. If only he knew! God the Son would endure public disgrace beyond David's wildest imagination. O, how God enters our sorrow!
- We tend to think God doesn't know our pain. If He did, we reason, He would have prevented it to start with! This reasoning is not just untrue; it is arrogant. God censured Job's protests against God's "unjust" treatment with these words in Job 40:1-8: *"And the LORD said to Job: 'Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it.' Then Job answered the LORD and said: 'Behold, I am of small account; what shall I answer you? I lay my hand on my mouth. I have spoken once, and I will not answer; twice, but I will proceed no further.' Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind and said: 'Dress for action like a man; I will question you, and you make it known to me. Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?'"*
- Lord, help me not to be a faultfinder with Your sovereign oversight of my life! I'm the ultimate armchair quarterback! Father, you know exactly what I need and when I need it. Forgive me for presuming to know what's best for me—even more than You.

—"reproach/reproaches":

- NASB: "my disgrace"
- The word (Heb. *herpa*) appears often in this song, appearing in vv. 7 ("I have borne reproach"), 9 ("the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me"), 10 ("when I wept... with fasting, it became my reproach"), 19 ("You know my reproach"), 20 ("Reproaches have broken my heart").
- The word "reproach" agrees with "shame" and "dishonor", for they all relate to public embarrassment resulting from slanderous insults.

—"my foes are all known to you":

- God does not just know David's disgrace (19); He knows the enemies who caused it (20).

- God possesses perfect knowledge of our suffering. He knows the depth of pain we feel; He knows physical and spiritual realities that inflicted it. No evil escapes the divine filter. He had already seen, evaluated, assessed, and scrutinized every foe before he, she, or it (a demonic power) laid malevolent eyes on us. It comforts David—and us—to know that evil does not shock God. He knew it was coming and allowed it, but without violating His infinite goodness.

—Why does David state in vv. 19-20 that God perfectly knows his pain and the enemies who caused it?

This comes on the heels of v. 18, where David prays to be redeemed and rescued from enemies. To paraphrase, David is saying, “God, my cry for help is not news to You. You knew it all along! You know the depths of my suffering and the wickedness of those who inflicted! You can’t claim ignorance, God—do something!”

—“broken my heart... I am in despair: the Hebrew parallel shows how these mean the same thing. Here, David complains of his emotional anguish. Next, of his social isolation.

—“there was none... I found none”: the repetition emphasizes David’s isolation. He looks hopefully for pity, for comforters, but he finds nobody. Worse, he receives torture. See v. 21.

21 They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink.

—David’s enemies either tricked or mocked him by giving him poison and sour wine. If they tricked him, David thought he would be nourished only to receive poison and satisfied only to receive a bitter drink. Alternatively, if they mocked him, they knew David was starving and parched, so they forced him to consume what pained him.

—A third possibility also exists: this could be metaphorical for the deceptive and mocking behavior of David’s enemies. Given the genre of literature, I would guess this to be the case.

—A number of verses speak of Jesus being offered a drink in His final hours, but they require us to sort through their relationship to Psalm 69:

- Matt. 27:34: they offered him **wine to drink, mixed with gall**, but when he tasted it, he would not drink it.
- Matt. 27:48-50: And one of them at once ran and took a sponge, filled it with **sour wine**, and put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink. But the others said, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to save him.” And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit.
- Mrk. 15:23: And they offered him **wine mixed with myrrh**, but he did not take it.
- Mrk. 15:36-37: And someone ran and filled a sponge with **sour wine**, put it on a reed and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see whether Elijah will come to take him down.” And Jesus uttered a loud cry and breathed his last.
- Luke 23:36: The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him **sour wine**.
- Jhn. 19:28-30: After this, Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the Scripture), “I thirst.” A jar full of **sour wine** stood there, so they put a sponge full of the **sour wine** on a hyssop branch and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the **sour wine**, he said, “It is finished,” and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.

—None of the above verses reference Psalm 69 directly, but Matt. 27:34 provides the most direct correlation. It mentions “gall,” which derives from Psalm 69:21 of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament). Translating “poison” as “gall,” the Septuagint reads like this, “They gave me also gall for my food, and made me drink vinegar for my thirst.”

—Matthew says the wine was mixed with gall, but Mark says it was mixed with myrrh. It might have been mixed with both. In the words of RT France, “It is impossible to be sure just what drug the soldiers put in the wine...”

—It appears that Jesus was offered a drink two times: on the way to the cross, wine mixed with gall (Matt. 27:34) and myrrh (Mrk. 15:23); in his final breaths, sour wine (Matt. 27:48; Mrk. 15:36-37; Luke 23:36; Jhn. 19:28-30).

—RT France: “Jesus’ refusal of the laced wine might be simply because it was, as in the psalm, an unpleasant drink offered in spite. But if, as is more likely, it was intended to dull the pain, Matthew may have mentioned Jesus’ refusal in order to show his determination to go through the ordeal in full consciousness. He has chosen to drink the cup which his Father has given him (26:39-42), and will not be deflected by any human potion, however well meaning.”

—The main purpose of the gospel allusions is to show that Jesus is the righteous sufferer of Psalm 69 whose zeal for God’s house caused God’s enemies to torture Him.

22 Let their own table before them become a snare; and when they are at peace, let it become a trap.

—Ross: "They had given him poison and sour wine for food and drink; it is fitting that their celebratory feasts become their undoing, as they are found out and destroyed suddenly."

—David has just finished sharing about what they did to his meals; he asks that their meals likewise bring harm. Poetically, he asks God to repay his enemies—not more than they deserve but rather what they deserve.

23 Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see, and make their loins tremble continually.

—"Let their eyes be darkened":

- Darkened eyes can refer to physical or spiritual blindness. Paul quotes this verse in the latter sense in Romans 11.
- In 69:3, David complains, "My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God." Now he asks God to dim their eyes. Again, David asks for perfect justice. He prays that they suffer in just the same way that he has.

—"loins tremble continually":

- When used in a purely physical sense, "loins" represents "the hips or lower part of the back, i.e. the middle part of the body" (Theological Wordbook of the OT)—the waist.
- Loins could represent the seat of strength. Deut. 33:11: "Bless, O LORD, his substance, and accept the work of his hands; **crush the loins of his adversaries**, of those who hate him, that they rise not again."
- Trembling loins represents broken strength. Ezek. 28:7: "when they grasped you with the hand, you broke and tore all their shoulders; and when they leaned on you, **you broke and made all their loins to shake.**"
- To make one's loins tremble continually is to break someone's strength. Figuratively, we should picture someone slammed so hard in the midsection that they collapse to the ground, struggling—quivering—to make the slightest move.
- The whole psalm has depicted David's weakness. Now he prays for just retribution—that his enemies be weakened.

—Romans 11 quotes Psalm 69:23. Observe:

- Rom. 11:7-13: *What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day." And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever." So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.*
- Paul is quoting from the Septuagint, which explains the minor variations.
- Paul's quote reveals that the "imprecatory (cursing) Psalms" belong just as much to God's inspired book as any other verse. They are not "devilish" as CS Lewis claimed (I otherwise love Lewis but disagree on this). On the contrary, they are divine.
- In context, Paul is explaining what has happened to the Jews who rejected Christ. David's imprecation is fulfilled in their lives. They have become spiritually darkened. They have handed away their vigor, their strength, their spiritual firstborn status.
- Paul's quote also clarifies that imprecations did not pronounce finality. Like (essentially) all prophetic warnings, they spoke conditionally. If a person repented, the woes and warnings would not come to pass. If a person did not repent, they would. See the story of Jonah or the principle spelled out in Jeremiah 18:7-10: "If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it."

- Now, back to Paul's quotation. He says of his fellow Jews that David's imprecation is fulfilled in them. However, he proceeds in verses 11-13 to hold out hope that the Jews will repent and their curse will turn to a blessing.
- All the imprecatory Psalms are this way. They assume persistence in rebellion. They also assume that if the person repents, the curse will not land (Pr. 26:2).

24 Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them.

—This is a catchall request that summarizes the surrounding general petitions.

—The request is for David's enemies to suffer God's wrath. God's wrath is not a passive removal of God's blessing or the accident of living in a fallen world. It is God's "burning anger" poured out in full strength. It is divine opposition to evil and a refusal to compromise with it.

—The New Testament commands us to "leave room for the wrath of God" (Rom. 12:19). The Old Testament models a more active pursuit of God's wrath against His enemies. Both the Old and New Testament are equally inspired, inerrant, and authoritative. However, we sometimes apply them differently, for we live in a different era. See comments above, under "Thoughts on Imprecatory Psalms."

—Other verses that use the word "indignation" (Heb. *za'am*):

- Ps. 38:3: "There is no healthy part in my flesh because of Your **indignation**; there is no health in my bones because of my sin."
- Ps. 78:49: "He sent His burning anger upon them, fury and **indignation** and trouble, a band of destroying angels."
- Ps. 102:9-10: "For I have eaten ashes like bread, and mixed my drink with weeping because of Your **indignation** and Your wrath; for You have lifted me up and thrown me away."

—Gospel writers allude to Psalm 69:4 ("hate me without cause"; cf. Jhn 15:4), Psalm 69:9a ("zeal for your house consumes me"; cf. Jhn. 2:17), and Psalm 69:21 ("poison for food"; cf. Matt. 27:34), to tell the story of Christ's crucifixion. But they never quote the imprecations. Where David curses his enemies—under far less suffering—the Son of David blesses and forgives His enemies. It cannot be accidental that Christ's life mirrors Psalm 69 in every way except one: the curses. The era of glad tidings has dawned.

—One might argue that since Romans 11:9-10 quotes Psalm 69:22 ("Let their own table become a snare..."), Christ did in fact pray the imprecatory psalms. Is it possible, however, that Jesus cursed His enemies on the way to the cross and that the Gospel writers neglected to tell us? Is it possible that in the same breath that Jesus forgave and blessed His enemies He also prayed damnation over them? I think not. If Psalm 69:22 is a prayer of Christ (technically, Paul does not say that it is), it is from His position at the right hand of God, from which place He has pronounced a preliminary judgment (cf. Matt. 26:64). This is categorically different than Jesus cursing His enemies as they persecuted Him. He did no such thing.

25 May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents.

—David was deserted (69:8, 20). David prays that his enemies would be deserted.

—The desertion David prays for relates not just to friends but to households. The word "camp" is translated in Acts 1:20 as "homestead" by the NASB. Just as David's family deserted him (69:8), David prays that his enemies would enjoy no family fellowship or legacy.

—This verse is quoted to depict Jesus' greatest enemy, Judas. See Acts 1:20.

—At first glance, it might seem that Peter pulled a verse out of nowhere and applied it to Judas. That's not the case, however. The apostles learned to interpret Scripture from Jesus, who opened the minds of some of them on the road to Emmaus to understand how all Scripture points to Jesus. Consistently throughout the New Testament, the apostles train us to find Christ in the types and shadows of the Old Testament. Because Jesus is our Greater David, the prayers and events of David's life foreshadow those of Jesus'. In Psalm 69, David prays about his enemies, which prophetically foreshadows the greatest human enemy of our Greater David.

26 For they persecute him whom you have struck down, and they recount the pain of those you have wounded. 27 Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal from you. 28 Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous.

—"For":

- David explains the rationale for his imprecation: they kicked David while he was down.
- Interestingly, however, David says, "they persecute him whom YOU have struck down" and whom "YOU have wounded." How can David attribute the brutality of his enemies.... to God?

- First, it's possible that David is simply saying that God had already placed David in a weak situation when the enemies swooped in against him. In this case, there is nothing to explain.
- It seems more likely, however, that David is attributing the activity of the enemies... to God. Again, how can this be?
- It is similar to how Joseph could say in one breath that "you sold me" into slavery and "God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:7). God is sovereign *even over human rebellion*. Neither Joseph nor David diminish the culpability of those who opposed them. Instead, Joseph and David magnify the sovereignty of God over all things, including sin. David's enemies struck him down and wounded him. At the same time, God sovereignly presided over his suffering. In that sense, David could attribute the action to God.
- On a personal level, I find great comfort in knowing that God is sovereign even over rebellion. For one, He's sovereign over my rebellion! He can keep me in check. Two, He is sovereign over those who attack me. When He decrees they must cease, they have no option but to lay down their arms.

—"punishment upon punishment... no acquittal": David wants God to slam the door shut on his enemies so tightly that the wind of mercy might never even pass through the cracks.

—"blotted out of the book of the living": the New Testament concept of a "Book of Life" possibly derives in part from this verse. We must remember, however, that Old Testament saints had only a hazy understanding of the afterlife. In the New Testament, the Book of Life refers to a list of God's elect who inherit eternal life (Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 13:8; 17:8; 20:15). However, David's Psalm almost certainly refers to the physical life of his enemies. All the other imprecations relate to their physical life, so we should not expect this verse to be uniquely about eternal life.

—David is thus praying that his enemies would perish so that only "the righteous" remained on earth. One day, God will fulfill this in the New Heavens and New Earth (Rev. 21-22).

—Unless God judges the wicked, this world is the best it ever gets. In order for God's people to enjoy a world of eternal harmony, God must destroy "the destroyers of the earth" (Rev. 11:18).

29 But I am afflicted and in pain; let your salvation, O God, set me on high! 30 I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. 31 This will please the LORD more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs. 32 When the humble see it they will be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. 33 For the LORD hears the needy and does not despise his own people who are prisoners.

—"But": this verse shifts the song away from imprecation against God's enemies and back toward the blessing received by God's friends.

—After a final complaint ("I am afflicted and in pain"), the drudgery of the opening verses gives way to petition ("let your salvation, O God, set me on high") and proclamation ("I will praise... I will magnify... the humble will see...", etc.).

—David's imprecations actually helped him move from the place of despair to hope. How can we, as New Covenant believers, move from despair to hope when such cursings are forbidden to us? We possess an assurance that David did not. We know that Jesus will one day return on a certain day to judge the living and the dead. We know that every wrong thing will be made right in an instant. We know that enemies who oppose us will pay finally and fully. David had a hazy awareness of this, but we have greater clarity. The Old Testament usually focuses on earthly judgments because they struggled to imagine anything else. Since some wicked people die rich and happy, earthly judgments did not seem quite sufficient. Psalmists would have struggled to imagine a post-mortem, perfect, judgment. So they prayed for God to judge NOW.

—Continuing with this thought, as New Covenant believers, we have sufficient clarity to "leave room for the wrath of God" (Rom. 12:19)—without actively calling down curses. When we bless our enemies, one of two things happens: (1) they experience grace through us, repent, and experience God's eternal blessing, or (2) they experience grace through us, resist, and their judgment becomes even greater because they resisted grace. This is why Paul says that blessing our enemies will heap burning coals on their heads (Rom 12:20).

—"This will please the LORD more than an ox...": God wants more than sacrifices. He wants us to pray to Him in dark times, discover His light, and praise Him for it. In short, He wants a friendship with us. He wants our hearts. A heart that delights in Him and praises Him for it brings Him far more pleasure than an empty-hearted sacrifice.

—"When the humble see it, they will be glad": David's oppressors are the proud. God's people are "the humble." At least, they are supposed to be! Humble people are "glad" about the judgment of the wicked

and the vindication of the righteous. We glimpse an eschatological fulfillment of this in Revelation 18 when the saints rejoice over Babylon's fall.

—It can be difficult to imagine celebrating judgment, but the Psalmists consistently hoped for such. Without belief in a God who judges, we cannot forgive. Without belief in a God who judges, the wicked get away with cruelty and the righteous suffer at their hands. Here are a couple of quotes about our God of judgment from past study guides:

- Miroslav Volf, who wrote during the ethnic cleansing and Yugoslav wars of the 90s. He says this: *"My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially theologians in the West. To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone (which is where a paper that underlies this chapter was originally delivered). Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. The topic of the lecture: a Christian attitude toward violence. The thesis: we should not retaliate since God is perfect noncoercive love. Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God's refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die. And as one watches it die, one will do well to reflect about many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind."*
- NT Wright: from Surprised By Hope: *"The word judgment carries negative overtones for a good many people in our liberal and postliberal world. We need to remind ourselves that throughout the Bible, not least in the Psalms, God's coming judgment is a good thing, something to be celebrated, longed for, yearned over. It causes people to shout for joy and the trees of the field to clap their hands. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be."*
- Without a fulsome view of God's wrath, we will misunderstand God's passionate, personal love. Divine wrath is not the same as a bad temper. His fuse is neither short nor His anger disproportionate. God's wrath is His passionate opposition to evil and His refusal to compromise with it. As such, wrath and love are two sides of the same coin. Those who caricature God as loving but not angry instead have a God who is neither. I cannot love my children without passionately opposing all that harms them. God's wrath is passionate for the very reason that His love is also.

—"let your hearts revive": it is not enough for the Psalmist to feel inward revival; he longs for outward revival. Once we taste and see God's goodness, we long for others to enjoy the same.

—"For the Lord hears the needy... His own people who are prisoners": David's cries for vengeance did not center on personal antipathy. Unlike the "self-avenger" of Psalm 8:2, David entrusts vengeance to God and seeks it on behalf of all God's people. In other words, David seeks vengeance not by himself or for himself (alone) but rather by God and for God's people.

34 Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them. 35 For God will save Zion and build up the cities of Judah, and people shall dwell there and possess it; 36 the offspring of his servants shall inherit it, and those who love his name shall dwell in it.

—The heart of a true worshipper cannot be contained. Not only does David call on the humble to experience revival; he calls on the entire earth to praise God!

—The rest of humanity worshiped creation, but David calls on creation itself to worship God. This does not mean that he expects trees to literally clap their hands and sing. Instead, the Psalm looks forward to the day when "creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God" (Rom. 8:21). Sin cursed the ground, but God did not give up on His material creation. Creation groans to once again be the life-giving home of those made in God's image. If we only thought Jesus redeemed people, we underestimated the Cross. The Gospel is good news for every square inch of the universe—from the smallest amoeba to the most distant star. As the old Christmas song says, *"No more let sins and sorrows grow / Nor thorns infest the ground / He comes to make His blessings flow / Far as the curse is found..."*

—"For God will save Zion":

- Jerusalem appears to have been under assault. Some interpreters reason that the Psalm was not written by David since this verse doesn't seem to fit David's life (they say). However, this Psalm

could speak of the many wars in 2 Samuel 8 or some other unnamed time. Furthermore, Paul ascribes the Psalm to David (Rom. 11:9).

- Other interpreters believe the Psalm was written by David but edited in the final edition during the exile. If that's true, the Scriptures are no less inspired. God's word speaks authoritatively in the form it was handed down to us, regardless of who wrote what.

—As David's wrestling match with God draws to a close, he clings confidently to Zion's future for God's people and their offspring. This found its initial fulfillment in Israel, as God established peace on all sides, especially through Solomon. Jesus, however, is our greater Solomon. Solomon means "peace." Through Jesus, we have peace with God and each other (Eph. 2:11-22); through Jesus, we approach heavenly Zion every time we gather for worship (Heb. 12:22-24); through Jesus, we enter heavenly Zion upon death (Rev. 14:1-5; cf. 15:2-4); through Jesus, heavenly Zion will descend, as the realms of heaven and earth become one like a bride and groom, and we live forever in a renewed creation (Rev. 21:1-4).