

Psalm Genres (Part Two): Imprecatory Psalms

Cursing One's Enemies

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I think you will find at the end of this sermon that Austin's sermonette fits very well into what I am going to be saying today, and also the song that we just sang—it is on Psalm 62, page 50 in the hymnal. It has the general theme of God is my rock, God is my fortress, God is my refuge, that sort of thing, and that He is the one that avenges us. You will see how that fits in a bit.

When I was a kid in Columbia, South Carolina, my dad normally did not get the daily paper, but he usually sprang for the Sunday paper—The State down there in Columbia. I read exactly two sections of that newspaper. Other members of my family read different parts. I know Mom got all the coupons and stuff, but I read the sports pages, and I read the cartoons. Those were the two that I really could sink my teeth into. You have got to understand I was somewhere between 9 and 15 or 16 when all this was happening, so those were the two going concerns in my life.

One of my favorite cartoons at the time—before Calvin and Hobbes—was Charles M. Schulz's Peanuts strip that was always full color on the front page of the comics there on Sundays. And I especially liked it when Snoopy was featured, either imagining he was a great novelist about to pen the great American novel, or when he was dogfighting—no pun intended—the Red Baron from the roof of his doghouse. I found out recently that in 1966, which is the year of my birth, Charles Schulz published a book, *Snoopy and the Red Baron*. Now you know what it is all about.

It features Snoopy dressed in his pilot's aviator cap and goggles and a scarf always flying out behind him, hurling his Sopwith Camel into the sky with defiance and dash and courage to challenge the infamous Red Baron. But for some reason, the Red Baron, who is never pictured in the cartoons, always gets the better of the canine World War I flying ace. His doghouse becomes riddled with bullet holes, and the last cel of the strip often has Snoopy shaking his fist in the air and shouting, "Curse you, Red Baron!"

Now, Snoopy's frustrated howl is a form of what is called an imprecation. You remember that I talked about imprecatory psalms just a little bit in last week's sermon, and I decided to go full whole hog (let us change beasts here from dogs to pigs) about these imprecatory psalms today.

But an imprecation is simply a spoken curse. If one imprecates, he invokes or brings down a curse or some other sort of evil on someone or something. The word, if you know your Greek and Latin roots you will know that this one comes from Latin. It is the word *imprecari*, and it means simply "to invoke."

And if we break the word down into its parts, you have 'im' which is often 'in,' in English, it changes over, but in this case it does not, and that usually means in or sometimes it could mean toward or even upon. Prepositions are that way. It is a little difficult sometimes to figure out what exactly the direction of what you are talking about is going in. But 'im' and 'precari': precari means to pray. So it literally means to pray toward or to pray upon (not prey, pray).

This word imprecation can also name a more formal prayer or a psalm asking for a curse or a calamity to befall someone. A similar word, also from Latin (and they had a lot of different words for curse), but this one is malediction. It means basically, a speaking of ill, or the verb form would be to speak ill of another. But the biblical view of imprecation is that last one that I said before malediction. It is a formal prayer or a psalm, asking for a curse or calamity to befall another.

Let us go to Joshua chapter 6. We will start here. If you know your chapters, you know Joshua 6 is the fall of Jericho with all the Israelites going around the city with the priests and the trumpets and all that, and the walls came tumbling down, as the old song says. But we are going to just read verses 26 and 27. This is after everything has happened.

Not only did the walls come tumbling down, and the Israelites go in and kill everything there, but Joshua burned the city to the ground.

Joshua 6:26-27 Then Joshua charged them [meaning Israel] at that time, saying, "Cursed be the man before the Lord who rises up and builds this city Jericho; he shall lay its foundation with his firstborn, and with his youngest he shall set up its gates." So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout all the country.

Joshua invokes a curse on anybody who would dare to rebuild Jericho. Now this does not necessarily mean that anybody who would live, let us say, on the mound that was Jericho, was cursed to give two sons, because we find out from other places that there was settlement there between this time of Joshua and later when somebody actually did try to rebuild Jericho and actually succeeded.

So it does not mean that the curse would come down on anyone who would just try to live there. It really means that the curse would come down on a person who tried to build it into a fortified city and use it as the people of Jericho had used it in Joshua's time. We know that Joshua could make this curse with some confidence. Obviously he was inspired to do this, to make this prophecy.

But we know that God had already cursed Jericho. Remember when they were given the instructions about Jericho? They were to take nothing there because Jericho had been doomed to destruction. And the only things that the Israelites—actually not even the Israelites, only the Levites—were able to take away from that city was the metals that they found there, and those metals—silver, gold, bronze, and what have you—were to go into the treasury of the Tabernacle. They were set aside as holy for God's use, and the rest of the city was doomed to destruction.

And so, Joshua's cursing anyone who tried to rebuild it was backed up by this doom that God had put on the city already. Now, you may ask, why did Joshua do this? Why did God allow Joshua to curse the city even further?

Well, it is a pretty simple answer, and that is, that Jericho, being the first major city that they came to and needed to conquer, was symbolic of the

Canaanites' iniquity and resistance to God. Even though they knew that coming through the wilderness God had been with the Israelites—Rahab even says that, "everybody knows what you guys did all these past 40 years and how you have had victory after victory, but you are coming to Jericho and they are ready to resist you."

And of course, they were proud in the city walls and how defensible Jericho was. And God showed them, He showed them very spectacularly with great amount of strength, who was the stronger, and so Jericho then became a symbol of what God would do to the rest of the Canaanite cities that resisted Him.

So, Joshua's curse then tends to show that God wanted Jericho to stand as a memorial for at least several hundred years of how futile it is to withstand God and to have that rebellious resistance against Him.

I mentioned before a man named Hiel, I am sure his middle name was not Hitler. Anyway, he rebuilt it in the days of Ahab and Jezebel. That gives you an idea what the tenor of the times was when he rebuilt that city as a fortified city. And you can look at that in I Kings 16:34, and of course the prophecy—the curse—was exactly as said. It was fulfilled exactly as said. He did lose his firstborn and his last born in the building of the city, just as the curse predicted.

Let us go to the book of Mark in the New Testament. We are going to look at another place where there is a curse made. This is in chapter 11, verses 12 through 14, and then we will pick up 20 through 24. And guess who the curser is here? None other than Jesus of Nazareth. And He does not curse a city or a particular person, but He curses a fig tree. What had the fig tree done to Him? Well, we will find out.

Mark 11:11-14 And Jesus went into Jerusalem [this is after His triumphal entry] and into the temple. So when He had looked around at all things, as the hour was already late, He went out to Bethany with the Twelve. Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to it to see if perhaps He would find something on it. And when He came to it, He found nothing but

leaves, for it was not the season for figs. In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." And His disciples heard it.

Let us drop down to verse 20.

Mark 11:20-24 Now in the morning, as they passed by, they saw the fig tree dried up from the roots. And Peter, remembering, said to Him, "Rabbi, look! The fig tree which You cursed has withered away." So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will come to pass, he will have whatever he says. Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you have received them, and you will have them."

Really interesting where this went.

So Jesus famously curses a fig tree, and He turns it into a lesson about asking God in faith for a thing to be done, and His disciples will receive it. He does not talk at all about curses or whatever. He just says, "Look, this is what happens when you say something and believe it and ask God to do something, and He responds."

This actually ties into what we will be going into later (just keep it in the back of your mind), that Jesus, the most righteous Man who ever lived, asked God to curse this fig tree, and He did it because He believed it and believed it needed to be done. I do not think we have the time to go into the controversy about why Jesus cursed it for not having figs even when it was not the season for them. I will leave that to others. We actually have a very good article in the archives by Dan Elmore who in 2012 did a fine *Forerunner* article on this section of verses. He called it "The Cursed Tree," if you want to check that out.

But for our purposes today, I want to point out that not all curses are evil. Jesus, our Savior, the perfect Man, invoked a curse on a tree to teach a spiritual lesson or two.

I will just give you some key words here about the spiritual lessons that He drew from it. Obviously a lesson of faith. But there is also a lesson there about the hypocrisy of people who should have been bearing fruit, but all they have is showy leaves. That is basically the same thing, what happens to a person who does not continue to grow and bear fruit.

Now this was not the only imprecation that Jesus ever did during His ministry. You can actually call all of His woes, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" they are all curses. We know that He, earlier than this, had cursed Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum for not recognizing who He was and turning. He said, "Sodom and Gomorrah are going to rise up in the judgment and do better than you."

So we are going to be considering obviously the Psalms of imprecation, another literary genre that we find in the book of Psalms. They are also called curse psalms. Maybe that is easier to understand, but that is exactly what we are going to consider. Why do the Psalms contain curses?

Now these psalms of imprecation, or imprecatory psalms, are psalms—I want you to get this wording—in which the authors under severe persecution or oppression call for misfortune, disaster, and even death to strike their enemies. And what we will see as we go through all of this and think about it more deeply, we will see that in the end these imprecations are cries for God's justice to fall down upon those who are doing evil with no restraint or no end in sight.

That puts them in a little bit different light than just merely calling down a curse because they are mean or they have done something bad. These imprecations that are found in the Psalms are things that are said in a time of horror or severe persecution. Now technically—and maybe I should just sit down after this when I say this—there are no imprecatory songs. Technically, there are no psalms that are filled entirely with curses. That is what I mean.

I mean, you do not open up to Psalm 175 and find out that this is curse after curse after curse after curse. Of course there is no Psalm 175, but there is no psalm that is fully imprecatory. It is more accurate to say that there are

imprecation prayers within the particular psalms that are considered imprecatory psalms. And most often these curses appear in psalms of lamentation. You know why?

Now when I said what I said about the extreme circumstances in which they are uttered, usually the curses run for just a few verses—oftentimes it is one or two verses, maybe three. But a few are a bit more extensive. There is one which we will get to at the end of the sermon that runs curses up to 15 verses. That probably is the only psalm that would qualify as an imprecatory psalm because most of its verses, or about half of its verses, are actual curses.

But I am going to give you a list of those psalms in which these curses can be found. This is a fairly long list. There are more imprecations in the Psalms than you may think. Psalm 5, 10, 11, 17, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 94, 109, 137, 139, and 140. That is a lot. I mean, that looks like about 15 psalms that I gave you there, and I did not give you all of them.

You can find imprecations in other psalms as well. These are the main ones that are agreed on. And not only that, they are not just in the Psalms. Similar imprecations are found in the prayers of Jeremiah and in the prayers of Nehemiah, and you will find at least two of them in the book of Lamentations—at the end of chapter 1 and chapter 3. So they are made frequently throughout especially the poetry books—so the poetry sections of the Bible.

Let us look at one just as a kind of a teaser and as a template for what we can expect. So let us go to the end of that list, and we are going to go to Psalm 137. Or you could pull out your hymnal if you like because 137 is a song we like to sing a lot: By the Waters of Babylon. That is 103 in your hymnal.

This is a psalm of lamentation set in the time of exile after the fall of Jerusalem in 586, 587 BC. And this is a great song, you know, There we wept and there sat down, hung our harps on the willow trees; Zion, yet we remember thee. I love to lead that song. I thought it was great. But let us read it.

Psalm 137:1-9 By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. We hung our harps upon the

willows in the midst of it. For there those who carried us away captive required of us a song, and those who plundered us required of us mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" [Entertain us.] How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her skill [meaning to pluck the lyre, the harp that they were playing]! If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth [so that he could not sing the song that they were asking him to play]—if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy. Remember, O Lord, against the sons of Edom. [This is a very important detail. We are talking about the perennial antagonism of Esau toward Jacob—Edom toward Israel. What happened?] the day of Jerusalem, who said [the Edomite said] "Raze it, raze it to its very foundation!" [Take it down like Joshua took down Jericho. Make it a smoldering heap. So the reply here in verse 8 of the people of Judah who were there in Babylon and thinking about this]: O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed, happy shall he be who repays you as you have served us! [verse 9 is what we do not have in our hymnal—probably good that Dwight Armstrong left this one out] Happy shall he be who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock!

Not a very happy thing to end this song with. But that is the imprecation. The imprecations are in verses 8 and 9, and verse 8 actually is the reason for—or explains; that is probably better—explains what is happening in verse 9. Now notice verse 8: "Happy shall he be who repays you for what you have served us!" So what does this say?

Verse 9 is what they did to the Jewish babies, and the Jews are saying, 'Watch out. You're going to be destroyed, and your babies are going to be dashed against the rock. And the people who do that—who come to destroy your nation—will be rejoicing when they do it.' Pretty brutal, is it not? Pretty gruesome. What they are saying here at the end of this Psalm is: "Watch out, Edom. What goes around comes around. These things balance out. You're not going to stay on top of the nations for long because there is going to come somebody stronger than you who will come after you and treat you the exact same way that you treated nations like Judah. Your time is coming. You're going to receive the same sort of treatment, and in that way we will be avenged."

This is why imprecatory psalms are the most controversial of the Psalm genres, and you can see that—these people of God, the Jews in Babylon asking for the Edomites' babies to be dashed against the rocks. That does not sound too good. Sounds wrong. Sounds *way* overboard.

I can understand that—that people do not think it is righteous for God's people to curse others in this way. Are we not just supposed to love our enemies? Is that not what Jesus said? (We will go into that in a little bit.) But Jesus not only says love your enemies, but it is also found in the Old Testament before the imprecatory psalms were penned—places like Leviticus 19:17-18 or Proverbs 25:21. They say very similar things: Help your enemy. Do not despise them. Give them what they need. Of course, love your neighbor comes from the Old Testament too.

So I can say with a great deal of confidence that in most cases, yes, it is wrong to wish harm upon others. We should not be going around cursing people. But we have already seen that two of the most righteous men in the Bible—obviously the most righteous Man, Jesus Christ, and the type of Jesus Christ, Joshua—uttered curses. So we need to see when these type of imprecatory prayers can be used. And I will tell you right now, it should be *very rare*.

Now before we study any of these psalms any further, we need to lay some foundational principles about why they are there in the Bible in the first place. We do not want to ascribe evil to God in saying that these curses are evil in themselves, nor do we want to ascribe evil to those He inspired to write these psalms like David or Asaph or Jeremiah or Nehemiah or whoever wrote Lamentations, which was probably Jeremiah again, or Joshua or Jesus Christ Himself.

These are in the Bible. They are true. But as I said, they are not necessarily for us to do regularly on a willy-nilly basis. We cannot think these people are vicious in their vengeance against their enemies because by saying something like that, we misjudge them if we do not have the right understanding of why they did it and how they did it, which we will see. So I just want to get across that these imprecatory psalms appear in Scripture for good reasons and not just as bad examples. There are good things that come

out of these curses for us in studying them, but we should not be doing it in our regular lives. Just put it that way.

I have got four principles here. It will take probably most of the rest of the sermon to get through these. Well, at least half of the rest of the sermon.

The first one is: Realize that these imprecations are *prayers* to God. They are *requests* made to God for *Him* to act. David, Asaph are saying, God, this is what is going on. Please help. *You* help. All right?

The psalmists never take vengeance into their own hands. Not once. You will not find them, with a little note at the end of the psalm, and David went out and killed 40,000 Philistines. It does not say that. He asked God. God answers. God does the thing he asks. We have got to think of these situations that they are in. They are usually oppressed at the moment or they have already been conquered, and they are in no position to act for themselves. They cannot take vengeance. They are literally unable. They do not have the strength.

They know though—because usually these are righteous men—that the wages of sin is death, just like Paul said in Romans 6:23. And the wages of sin is death is actually an imprecation or can be made into an imprecation. Just the fact that sin itself—or the breaking of the law—causes a curse. Is that not the curse of the law, that when you break it, you come under the penalty? And that penalty cannot be erased unless one pays it for you, which Jesus Christ—this is the thing that He became a curse for us to pay that, that price to redeem us.

So that in itself, when you say that someone is a sinner, in a way is saying that you are calling down the curse of the law on them. You are making it known that this person is under the curse of the law. And so the psalmist then, knowing that the breaking of the law brings a curse, they ask God to mete out His wrath on their sinful enemies. They are just asking Him to do it sooner rather than later. Speed up the timetable so that the curse of the law can come upon these people. They deserve it. Look what they did. That is what these imprecations usually are—something along this line.

And we will see this as we go through another one of the psalms—how this is usually laid out in these various psalms of imprecation. They usually give very good reasons why God should do these things. They do not just cry out, "God, slaughter these people!" They make a case for why God should speed up the timetable and give them death that they obviously deserve.

The second principle: Their seeming hatred, that is, the psalmist's seeming hatred, anger, and very extreme requests which seem very foreign to us, are actually rooted in deep violations of their sense of fairness, or justice, rightness. (I know that was a mouthful.) They see with their own eyes; they feel in their own bodies that something is terribly lopsided and unfair in the way that they are being treated.

They complain so bitterly because their foes' wicked treatment of God's people has gone so far overboard. It is not right. That is, they are witnesses to—and sometimes even suffering from—extreme evil. We talk about inhumane treatment. Well, that is what they are feeling, and why they make these appeals to God for vengeance. They feel it, and they know it is not right—deep down to their bones; something has gone terribly askew.

I can say with certainty that the things they are experiencing are not minor inconveniences like somebody cutting you off in traffic or everyday slights—somebody forgot to text you back or something like that. These are real life-and-death type of things. Terrible things. Extremely evil, satanic, the depths of wickedness, you could say, that are happening to them, and they have no recourse. They only have God because they are so poor. They are so weak; they are helpless. They cannot do anything. And so God—God is their rock, God is their fortress, God is their refuge—God alone can do these things that are necessary to level the playing field again, to bring justice.

So since evil is in every way contrary to God's nature and plan, the psalmist thus requests that God right these wrongs, that He reestablishes equity, and He brings peaceful conditions that allow righteousness and good relations to flourish once again. See, their world has been totally flipped over. It is upside down. And they are asking God to right it to a point where they can live again without the fear, without the pain.

One way to look at these cruel curses is to consider them what the scholars call hyperbolic expressions of outrage, meaning there are great exaggerations expressing how wrong everything is, how bad everything is. And these expressions of outrage are for egregious acts of wickedness against God's people. Like I said, this is not because somebody punched you in the nose or did something that you did not like. No, these are major existential type of things. Life or death.

The third principle: These imprecations are calls for *God's* justice to fall on their enemies. They are calls for God's justice, let us emphasize that—*God's justice*—to fall on their enemies, and there is a reason for this, why they call upon this. And they do so saying that God's justice will bring mercy and relief to those who are suffering.

So the imprecations are calls for God's justice to fall on their enemies as a mercy to those who are suffering—that the only way that the people who are suffering can have their condition reversed is that their enemies feel justice; they feel the wrath of God. That is the only way the wrong is going to be righted. So they ask for the scales of justice to be balanced—to put it another way. They are not necessarily asking for those who are suffering to be made strong again and punch down the wicked. They are just asking God to right the scales of justice and to bring justice upon those who are currently strong and evil and wicked.

Let us look at Psalm 83 as an example. This is the psalm of Asaph, and this one may be among the best of the imprecatory psalms. We are going to read the first four verses, and then drop down to verse 9.

Psalm 83:1-4 Do not keep silent, O God! Do not hold Your peace, and do not be still, O God! For behold, Your enemies make a tumult; and those who hate You have lifted up their head. They have taken crafty counsel against Your people, and consulted together against Your sheltered ones. They have said, "Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation, that the name of Israel may be remembered no more."

So here we have a setting of the scene—what is going on—and it is a lot of bad people in the section that we will skip here. He lists the nations that are

conspiring against Israel and he implores God to do something. Do not be silent, he says. Say something, do something. Turn this around for us somehow. And he gives God an idea of what is going on. Of course, God knows that, but he lays it out here in the first four verses.

Down to verse 9. This is where the imprecations begin.

Psalm 83:9-12 Deal with them as with Midian [Now you would have to go back into the Old Testament, when they are in the wilderness and what happened with Midian once things got to a point where God decided just to wipe them out.], as with Sisera [What happened to Sisera? Sisera got a nail or a tent peg through his temple.] as with Jabin at the Brook Kishon. [another victory], who perished at Endor, who became as refuse on the earth. Make their nobles like Oreb and like Zeeb, yes, all their princes like Zebah and Zalmunna, who said, "Let us take for ourselves the pastures of God for a possession."

Now we are seeing the height of what is going on here. They are trying to take the Promised Land. They are trying to take what is God's and what God has given to His people. And so the psalmist—Asaph here—is saying, God, do not let them do this. You know what is going on.

Let us go on. We will go to the end of the chapter here; the imprecations spin out here.

Psalm 83:13-18 O my God, make them like the whirling dust, like the chaff before the wind! [Scatter them; blow them away.] As the fire burns the woods, and as the flame sets the mountains on fire, so pursue them with Your tempest, and frighten them with Your storm. Fill their faces with shame, that they may seek Your name, O Lord. Let them be confounded and dismayed forever; yes, let them be put to shame and perish, that men may know that You, whose name alone is the Lord, are the Most High over all the earth.

Like I said, this is one of the best ones because Asaph does not just leave it with, you know, kill them all, Lord, get them out of our hair. Asaph takes it a step further, and he says, God, scatter them, chase them with the storm;

confound them. But he says, make them ashamed of themselves. Why? So that they would repent and seek the Lord—that they would change their minds, that they would stop persecuting Israel and stop trying to take the land from them and actually turn to the God of Jacob and live and be better people.

Asaph's hatred here—if you want to call it that—is against his enemy's sinfulness and their hatred of God. He is actually asking God to make it so they do not hate Him anymore, and that will make things all the better. If they do not hate God, they take away the cause for what they are doing. We could also go to Psalm 139:19-22. This is where David is doing a similar thing, and David really gets dinged for this one because he says that he hates God's enemies with a perfect hatred. And that means a complete hatred. There is no love there. It says absolutely he hates what God hates, and he hates them for their blasphemy and rebellion against God.

Let us go on to the next principle—the last one, the fourth one. And that is we cannot ignore the covenant relationship between God and Israel because it plays a part in these imprecatory psalms; it is a crucial factor in them.

Let us go back to Deuteronomy 29. This is a section in which the covenant is renewed as they are about to go into the land. I want to read a fair amount of this so we get the progression of what is happening within the covenant and the various responsibilities of each party.

Deuteronomy 29:1 These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He made with them in Horeb.

So He redid the covenant here. Not that He changed it at all, but He respoke it to them to help them understand and He respoke it through Moses.

Let us start in again in verse 9 and we will go down through 15.

Deuteronomy 29:9-15 "Therefore [He says] keep the words of this covenant, and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do. All of you stand today before the Lord your God: your leaders and your

tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones and your wives—also the stranger who is in your camp, from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water—that you may enter into covenant with the Lord your God, and into His oath which the Lord your God makes with you today, that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you, just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I make this covenant and this oath, not with you alone, but also with him who stands here with us today before the Lord your God, as well as with him who is not here with us today."

So setting it up here: You are supposed to do what the Lord says in the covenant, and He says not only with you but with all of the people who are here and future generations.

Let us drop down to verse 18:

Deuteronomy 29:18-20 "So that there may not be among you man or woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of these nations; and that there may not be among you a root bearing bitterness or wormwood; and so it may not happen, when he hears the words of this curse, that he blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall have peace, even though I walk in the imagination of my heart' [meaning I go in my own way; I do not keep the covenant]—as though the drunkard could be included with the sober. The Lord would not spare him [that is, the person who went his own way against the covenant]; for then the anger of the Lord and His jealousy would burn against that man, and every curse that is written in this book would settle on him, and the Lord would blot out his name from under heaven."

Within the covenant there was this curse—or a series of curses—that would come upon a person who had taken the oath, who had vowed to keep the covenant, if he went against the covenant. So there were penalties within the covenant that he had to be aware of, and that would help him as the stick to keep him from wandering away.

So the Israelite knew that when you did well—you did good; you obeyed the voice of the Lord—He would bless you and prosper you. But when you did evil and went away from the covenant, there were automatic curses that fell upon them. They would begin to have a difficult time.

It does not end here. I mean, God is very fair and just. He will give blessing and reward for obedience, and He will give punishment and curses for disobedience.

Let us go on:

Deuteronomy 29:27-28 [If you have this whole nation going against God] Then the anger of the Lord was aroused against this land, to bring on it every curse that is written in this book. [This happened.] The Lord uprooted them from their land in anger, in wrath, and in great indignation, and cast them into another land, as it is this day.

Now he is talking about a historical occurrence, and then it is also a prophecy.

Let us go into chapter 30.

Deuteronomy 30:1-3 Now it shall come to pass, when all these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God drives you, and you return to the Lord your God and obey His voice, according to all that I command you today, you and your children, with all your heart, with all your soul, that the Lord your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the Lord your God has scattered you.

That happened in type after God brought back Jews, Levites, priests from Babylon, and it is going to happen again at the end time in the antitype when He regathers Israel to Himself after His return.

Let us see. Verses 7 and 8 and we will end here. Once this happens—once He regathers and reestablishes:

Deuteronomy 30:7-8 "Also the Lord your God will put all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you. And you will again obey the voice of the Lord and do all His commandments which I command you today."

This is part of the covenant that we have to understand in order to really comprehend what is going on in these imprecatory psalms. It is part of the covenant that when Israel goes astray and they repent and they are righteous again—they are doing God's will—that He will reverse what is happening, what has happened to their land, and put those curses on their enemies. He will avenge them.

This gives them a foundation for why the psalmists asked for the curses on their enemies. They are following the covenant. They are reminding God: Look, You said this in the covenant that You would do this. Now do unto them. Give them the same curses that You cursed us with because we went astray. This is especially evident in Lamentations. You know, Jeremiah going through all that—recognizing how far Judah had gone astray and why God brought the hammer down on Jerusalem and Judah—and then in the aftermath, he is able to see all of this and finally ask God to turn this around and bring those same curses on the Babylonians, for instance.

So the imprecatory prayers become cries to God to uphold His end of the bargain as their protector, as their defender. God promised to curse Israel's enemies and to fight their battles for them. And the imprecatory psalms are just that—asking God to defend them, protect them, and fight their battles for them. These prayers of vengeance are appeals to Him to do just that—to fulfill the covenant promises He made with Israel.

Now in many imprecatory psalms, the psalmist frequently stresses at some point that he is obedient or he is clean or he is righteous or he listens to God's voice or he does the law. He in some way expresses a repentant or a humble attitude, and his suffering—a result of God's wrath usually for disobedience and rebellion—has drawn him back to the Lord. He has repented, and in that state he asks for God's justice for him or for the nation.

It is following what we read here in Deuteronomy 29 and 30. He is going, like a real legalist, right along the law and saying, This has happened. I have done this. I have repented. You told me that once I repent and am back in Your good graces that You will put these curses on my enemies. And so He does. It mirrors the course of events here that are described in Deuteronomy 29 and 30.

Let us go to Psalm 5 as an example of one of these psalms. This is another one of the psalms in our hymnal: Give ear unto my words, O Lord—it is page 4 in our hymnal. We will just read the whole thing. It is not very long—Psalm 5, or page 4 in your hymnal.

Psalm 5:1-12 Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my meditation. Give heed to the voice of my cry, my King and my God, for to You I will pray. My voice You shall hear in the morning, O Lord; in the morning I will direct it to You, and I will look up [meaning he will expect an answer]. For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with You. The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity. You shall destroy those who speak falsehood; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful man. But as for me, I will come into Your house in the multitude of Your mercy; in fear of You I will worship toward Your holy temple. Lead me, O Lord, in Your righteousness because of my enemies; make Your way straight before my face. For there is no faithfulness in their mouth; their inward part is destruction; their throat is an open tomb; they flatter with their tongue. Pronounce them guilty, O God! Let them fall by their own counsels; cast them out in the multitude of their transgressions, for they have rebelled against You. But let all those rejoice who put their trust in You; let them ever shout for joy because You defend them; let those also who love Your name be joyful in You. For You, O Lord, will bless the righteous; with favor You will surround him as with a shield.

I think you are getting some of this, and these principles are coming together as to why these psalms would be curses in this way. This is a good template

for the other imprecatory psalms. It is a lament or a cry for help with a few verses of imprecation to implore God to act on his or her behalf, and then asking for blessings on the righteous.

Now we do not know all the circumstances of David's life at this time, but he expects God to hear his prayer and give him help and guidance in dealing with his enemies. And in verses 4 through 6, he lets God know the wicked people he is dealing with. They are boasters; they are sinners; they are liars; they are bloodthirsty men; they are deceitful. And he knows that God takes no pleasure in sinners like that—in such people.

And then in the next section, verses 7 through 8, he reminds God that he himself—David—is faithful in worshipping Him, and he asks for help in how to deal righteously with his enemies. That is what it says in there in verse 8: "Lead me, O Lord, in Your righteousness because of my enemies; make Your way straight before my face." He is asking Him, How should I work with them? You know, how can I still follow You yet work this problem out?

And then in verses 9 and 10—that is the imprecatory section. He begins with repeating their sinfulness. Their deceitful words aim to bring David to destruction. They want to kill him while they flatter him in hypocrisy. So David asks, "God, please judge them guilty of their sins. Judge them and bring their sentence upon them. Let them be caught in their own deceitful stratagems and even let them be cast out."

Now you can take this as literally being cast out—like banished or outlawed or excommunicated—but such phraseology could also mean that they would be executed. They would be cut off from their people. And all of this he is asking of God is for his enemy's transgressions against God and man. "They're already under a curse. God, speed it up."

And in verses 11 and 12, he returns to the faithful among God's people in his thought, and he asks God to use His vengeance for them as an example to them—that God will act as a shield to them, that they will look and see this example and know that God has worked out a great deliverance, and that they too can share in this if they ask God in faith.

Is that not what Jesus said? If you ask God something and you believe, He will give it to you. So these people—God's people—will rejoice because they know they have seen an example that God will defend them even from the worst of things. Even when they have evil, implacable enemies, God will stand for them.

Let us go to Psalm 109. C.S. Lewis commented about this psalm; that he felt it was, "Perhaps the worst," because it feels so hateful, harsh, and vindictive. Why did he say that? Because it contains 24 curses. He wrote about imprecatory psalms in general, "In some of the Psalms, the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like heat from a furnace's mouth."

Now we have to remember though that the hatred that is shown in these imprecatory psalms is not against the people necessarily; it is against what God hates, that is, sin, evil, wickedness, especially those kinds of sins that are aimed spitefully and undeservedly at God's people. Remember the covenant. God has made promises that He is going to protect His people, and so He has to hold up His part of the bargain, and the people of God should be totally on His side and hate the things He hates and be against those things that He is against. And so in unity the people of God ask God to act on those things that are totally evil.

Let us go through this. How much do I want to read here? I have in my notes to read the whole thing, but let us just start here.

Psalm 109:1-5 Do not keep silent, O God of my praise! [That sounds familiar. He had said that in another one we saw.] For the mouth of the wicked and the mouth of the deceitful have opened against me; they have spoken against me with a lying tongue. They have also surrounded me with words of hatred and fought against me without a cause. In return for my love they are my accusers, but I give myself to prayer. Thus they have rewarded me evil for good, and hatred for my love.

Here starts the imprecations—the 24.

Psalm 109:6-14 Set a wicked man over him, and let an accuser stand at his right hand. When he is judged, let him be found guilty,

and let his prayer become sin. Let his days be few, and let another take his office. [That is actually used in Acts 1 about Judas.] Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. Let his children continually be vagabonds and beg; let them seek their bread also from their desolate places. [there is very little bread in desolate places] Let the creditor seize all that he has, and let strangers plunder his labor. Let there be none to extend mercy to him, nor let there be any to favor his fatherless children. [He is asking for a life here.] Let his posterity be cut off, and in the generation following let their name be blotted out. Let the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before the Lord, and let not the sin of his mother be blotted out.

And it goes on and on and on.

Psalm 109:21-31 But You, O God the Lord, deal with me for Your name's sake; because Your mercy is good, deliver me. For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me. I am gone like a shadow when it lengthens; I am shaken off like a locust. My knees are weak through fasting, and my flesh is feeble from lack of fatness. I have also become a reproach to them; when they look at me, they shake their heads. [That is a Messianic prophecy of Jesus on the cross.] Help me, O Lord my God! Oh, save me according to Your mercy, that they may know that this is Your hand—that You, Lord, have done it! Let them curse, but You bless; when they arise, let them be ashamed, but let Your servant rejoice. Let my accusers be clothed with shame, and let them cover themselves with their own disgrace as with a mantle. I will greatly praise the Lord with my mouth; yes, I will praise Him among the multitude. For He shall stand at the right hand of the poor, to save him from those who condemn him.

So David here is asking God to bring such people down—take away their power and even their lives if need be—for their sins, which is part of the curse of the law. They already carried the death penalty. David is just asking for it to be enacted. Their actions, which are clearly unrepented of, deserved

the worst of punishments. And David requests God to fight for him. He asks for deliverance, and he asks for it that they may know that this is Your hand—that You, Lord, have done it.

He does not want to be part of the curse; he does not want to give them the violence that he is asking for; he wants God to do that. What does God say? It is mentioned in both testaments: "Vengeance is Mine; I will repay." And he is just basically saying, "God, please take that vengeance. I don't want to be part of it, but You know the best way to do this." So he is putting dealing with his enemies in God's hands, not his own, because he knows God will deal with them righteously and give them what they deserve. David here asks only for justice and equity.

Let us finish in Matthew 5, part of the Sermon on the Mount, verses 43 through 45, where Jesus says:

Matthew 5:43-45 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father 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."

Under the New Covenant—not anymore under the Old—Jesus raises the bar for us under His law. He is talking in the spirit of the command to love one's neighbor. It has to extend not just to the neighbors that we are at peace with, but the neighbors that we are at war with. It even extends to one's enemy.

So what should we think about the imprecatory psalms, knowing what we have seen in the Old Testament and knowing what Jesus says here in the Sermon on the Mount? I can say that they have the potential of being very wrong—of being very wrongly used by us. But with the proper attitude and perspective, they can be good. Now we have to have the righteousness of David and Joshua and Jeremiah and Nehemiah to use them properly. That is, if they are made in truly righteous indignation, without hatred, spite, or a spirit of vengeance, which is difficult for us to do with our deceitful human nature, then they could be used properly.

So they are tricky. Imprecatory psalms are tricky, and it is not recommended that we take up cursing our enemies—especially considering what Christ advised. But they can be useful. These psalms can be helpful in praying through our anger, frustrations, and spite that we may feel, so that the end is to come into submission to God's will. They help us to remember that God will punish the wicked. He will punish the wicked in His own time and manner—even if it must wait until Christ's return in judgment. Because we are told in Revelation that He is coming to judge the earth, and He will do it thoroughly. No one ever gets away with sin because we have a God who knows, and He wants us to repent of those things, and He wants those enemies of ours to repent of those things.

Thus, when experiencing trials of persecuting adversaries, these psalms can teach us patience and endurance, and they could help us to seek God's strength and wisdom, knowing that the curse of sin will strike our enemies in God's time.