

### 3B. Finding the Answer in the Imprecatory Psalms

Former pastor at Southfield Presbyterian Church, Brian Schwertley, wrote a defense of EP: *A Brief Examination of Exclusive Psalmody*. I quote his approach to the problem of imprecatory Psalms. My comments and Qs are in brackets and italicized; the #s are mine.

1) Another objection to the sufficiency of the Psalter is the idea that the imprecatory Psalms are inappropriate for worship in the new dispensation. The imprecatory Psalms are songs in which the psalmist petitions God (often in a strong manner) to pour out His wrath upon his (the psalmist's) and/or the covenant people's enemies.<sup>49</sup> Isaac Watts (who did more to destroy exclusive Psalmody among Reformed believers than any other person) wrote, "While we are kindling into divine love by the Meditations of the Loving Kindness of God and the Multitude of His Tender Mercies, within a few Verses some dreadful Curse against Men is propos'd to our lips."<sup>50</sup> The idea that the imprecatory Psalms are inappropriate for Christians to sing is totally unbiblical for a number of reasons. First, the Psalms were written by the Holy Spirit; therefore, the idea that these imprecatory petitions are barbaric or unethical is totally wicked.

*[Do you see some way to reply to this point? They could be thought to be inappropriate without considering them barbaric or unethical; especially, if the inappropriateness is a matter of the history of redemption in the shift from the old covenant to the new.]*

2) Second, one can only regard the imprecatory Psalms as improper for new covenant believers if one holds to a dispensational or modernistic hermeneutic. Both of these theological perspectives are unscriptural and outside the pale of the Reformed faith.<sup>51</sup>

*[How might we counter-argue this claim (leaving the modernistic point to the side)? He tells us nothing specific about the dispensational hermeneutic; this is too sweeping, what is the wrong in particular? Moreover, good reformed biblical theology might be at work here in a non-dispensational way to appreciate change and progress in the history of redemption. In principle, if the use of imprecatory Psalms "passed away" in fulfillment like blood sacrifices, then it would be just as improper to use the one as the other and justifiably so. Finally, historical-redemptive considerations must surely be the context for resolving the tension between calling for curses on our enemies per the imprecatory Psalms and praying for their blessing per the Sermon on the Mount.]*

3) Third, the imprecatory Psalms are frequently quoted in the New Testament (e.g., Ps. 69 and 109). "Psalm 69, which bears more of the imprecatory character than any other Psalm except 109, is quoted in five separate places and referred to in several others. No other psalms are more frequently quoted in New Testament than the imprecatory psalms, except the Messianic psalms."<sup>52</sup> Jesus even applies Psalm 69 as a prophecy regarding His own situation (cf. Jn. 15:25). *[What are some fair and reasonable counter-points to raise to this line of argument? The fact of quotation and application of Psalms that have imprecation within them is not sufficient to establish how they were used, say, to pray for cursing and judgment on our enemies. For example, the quotation of Psalm 69 in John 15.25 makes the point that the hatred of Jesus was "without a cause." Jesus does not apply imprecation to His enemies; in fact, on the cross, He prays for them.]*

4) Furthermore, he cites this argument in fn52: "**Any argument that wars against the divine inspiration of the Psalms that we are considering wars against the whole Book of Psalms. They stand or fall together. The believer in inspiration will not therefore be guilty of irreverence and profanity of flouting these Psalms; for that which is said and done against them is said and done against the Holy Spirit; and who will dare to risk having such a charge lodged against him?" (J.H. Webster, "The Imprecatory Psalms" in Ed. John McNaugher, *The Psalms in Worship*, p. 312).**

*[How can we reply to this fn? A pointed answer to this way of reasoning is to note that understanding the Psalms in various ways per their character (as lament, prayers, imprecations...) in their historical-redemptive context is not an attack on the Psalms or on the Holy Spirit. To listen to Jesus and not pray these Psalms is to appreciate the fulfillment and change that He brought without “destroying” the law, prophets, or Psalms.]*

5) Many believers have argued that the imprecatory Psalms are an excellent reason why the church must have kinder, gentler hymns to supplement the Psalter. This type of thinking is unbiblical. It ignores both Scripture and history. One must always keep in mind that the Psalter was written and organized by the Holy Spirit. It therefore contains a balance and proper emphasis on the attributes of God and His dealings with men that is *exactly* what God desires. The attributes of God, such as His wrath, are not ignored or downplayed, but given proper emphasis. God’s hatred of the wicked and His awful judgments against them are an important part of the Psalter. “God is both sovereign and righteous; he possesses the unquestionable right to destroy all evil in his universe; if it is right for God to plan and effect this destruction, then it is right also for the saints to pray for the same.”

*[From this paragraph, what can we learn about the people who hold to EP? They believe in the sovereignty and righteousness of God as final judge. They have a hearty commitment to the authority of Scripture, to the application of that authority in the lives of the saints, including their prayer lives, and thus to the application of the regulative principle to worship. We must respect them for these things, even if we beg to differ with them on EP]*

Some further comments are in order.

A) Without even considering song in the assembly, the place and use of the imprecatory Psalms for the NT is difficult and all should acknowledge that fact. This would promote more humility and love.

B) S’s biblical basis for the appropriateness of singing the imprecatory Psalms is threefold. For short, only the 3<sup>rd</sup> has merit: the quotation of imprecatory Psalms in the NT (the other two are too general). Of course, the contextual use the NT makes is the key. For example, Jn. 15.25 quotes from Ps 69 but not in the vein of imprecation (believer’s asking God to curse unbelievers). Jesus quotes it to confirm sinful hatred of Messiah by unbelievers. *[Moreover, Luke (in Acts 1.20) quotes this Psalm (v. 25) in application to Judas, an enemy of Christ upon whom the imprecation of the Psalm fell. In John 2.17, the Psalm comes to fulfillment in the zeal of Christ for God’s house the zeal that “consumed” Him. In Romans 15.3, the Psalm reveals the suffering of Christ that we are to share in not pleasing ourselves: For Christ did not please Himself, but as it is written [in Ps. 69] the reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me. The six citations of Psalm 69 in the NT do not confirm Schwertley’s claim that these citations show that imprecation is appropriate on the lips of Christians in prayer and song. In turn, imprecation in the Psalms argues against EP, and it would seem that the argument is decisive.]*

C) Per the now/not yet of the coming of the kingdom, the imprecatory context of the OT text informs us of the final judgment of those who hate Christ, but now there is delay and gospel (wheat and tares) instead of imprecation and judgment. It looks to me that the EP position has many “biblical theology” mistakes in its view. It is amazing how important BT is for a number of areas where there is polarization (including women praying in the assembly). Accordingly, Ps. 69 is quoted in connection with Jesus cleansing the temple with holy zeal for God’s house. This anticipates the historical-redemption judgment on Israel (epitomized in 70 AD) and the formation of new temple worship for the time between [*cf. the application of Jesus’ zeal for God’s house*]. It also thus anticipates final judgment on all “not my people” (Jew and Gentile) that is delayed to the end of the age.

D) The difficulty we have with imprecation as NT followers of Christ (and the disagreements that exist on how to handle it) reveals the fact that even EP folk must do fallible interpretation every time they sing a Psalm and how they apply it may or may not be true to Scripture just as preaching is fallible and may not be true to Scripture. They do not get away from the fallibility issue because in the use of Scripture in song there is interpretation and when it is OT material, the misinterpretation is more common than we may see or admit.

E) It seems that imprecation is an Achilles heel for the EP position; it is a tough doctrine and it sifts and tests the strength of our BT (biblical theology), as well as our love as disciples of Christ who called us to pray for our enemies (Sermon on the Mount) and to give them gospel instead of judgment in the present time (cf. the parables of the wheat and tares and the fish net in relation to the Great Commission of Mat. 10, & 28; *perhaps, we must allow for thankfulness when God springs the trap on our enemies that they set for us; perhaps, we may even pray at times that God will do this to protect His people, say, in the marketplace or on mission in a "secular" environment, but surely, this is different from seeking the curses of God upon them forever.*). Granted, EP defenders want to read the OT in light of the NT and the Psalms in light of the NT, but how they work through this seems mistaken on one hand and reveals that the uninspired fallibility problem that EP seeks to transcend is unavoidable on the other. They intuitively interpret what they sing; they do so in light of the NT; they do so fallibly, though Christians probably get most of it right in the big picture of Christ in the OT.

*Back to the regulative principle*

*If EP is not a command of God, then it is not required for our singing in worship, and we claim it is not a command, as we have tried to show in the analysis and critique of EP.*

*Furthermore, if it is not a command, then to insist on EP wrongly binds the consciences of God's people in the important matter of their worship. The sincerity of those who defend EP truly softens the failure here, but it is a failure nonetheless. Of course, because of the OMH cluster of Christian graces, we must remain open to receive more insights and any considerations on this subject we may have overlooked.*

*Accordingly, we can draw this conclusion: we have God's commandment to worship Him by reading of Scripture, prayer, giving, the sacraments, preaching, and singing. Notably, we are bound to the use of the exact text of Scripture in only one of the six elements of church worship: the reading of Scripture. Otherwise, God calls us to diligent meditation and interpretation/application of Scripture in our praying, giving, use of the sacraments, preaching and singing.*

## Addendum on Psalm 69

*[Cited in Mat. 27.48 & Mk. 16.36 (giving Jesus sour wine); Jn. 2.17 (Jesus' zeal for the house of God); 15.25 (Jesus hated without cause); Rom. 15.3 (Jesus our example of one who was reproached); Acts 1.20 (imprecation of v. 25 applied to Judas)]*

**TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO LILIES. OF DAVID. Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. <sup>2</sup> I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me. <sup>3</sup> I am weary with my crying out; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. <sup>4</sup> More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause [ cf. Jn. 15.25 ]; mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me with lies. What I did not steal must I now restore? <sup>5</sup> O God, you know my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from you [surely, we have to do some hard work of interpretation on this verse in relation to Christ] <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> For it is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. <sup>8</sup> I**

have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons. <sup>9</sup> For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me. [cf. both Jn. 2.17 and Rom. 15.3] <sup>10</sup> When I wept and humbled my soul with fasting, it became my reproach. <sup>11</sup> When I made sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them. <sup>12</sup> I am the talk of those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> Deliver me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters. <sup>15</sup> Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me. <sup>16</sup> Answer me, O LORD, for your steadfast love is good; according to your abundant mercy, turn to me. <sup>17</sup> Hide not your face from your servant; for I am in distress; make haste to answer me. <sup>18</sup> Draw near to my soul, redeem me; ransom me because of my enemies! <sup>19</sup> You know my reproach, and my shame and my dishonor; my foes are all known to you. <sup>20</sup> Reproaches have broken my heart, [cf. v. 9 above and Rom. 15.3 on the reproaches that fell on Christ] so that I am in despair. I looked for pity, but there was none, and for comforters, but I found none. <sup>21</sup> They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me sour wine to drink. [cf. Mat. 27.48] <sup>22</sup> Let their own table before them become a snare; and when they are at peace, let it become a trap. <sup>23</sup> Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see, and make their loins tremble continually. <sup>24</sup> Pour out your indignation upon them, and let your burning anger overtake them. <sup>25</sup> May their camp be a desolation; let no one dwell in their tents. <sup>26</sup> For they persecute him whom you have struck down, and they recount the pain of those you have wounded. <sup>27</sup> Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal from you. <sup>28</sup> Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous. <sup>29</sup> But I am afflicted and in pain; let your salvation, O God, set me on high! <sup>30</sup> I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. <sup>31</sup> This will please the LORD more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs. <sup>32</sup> When the humble see it they will be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. <sup>33</sup> For the LORD hears the needy and does not despise his own people who are prisoners. <sup>34</sup> Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves in them. <sup>35</sup> For God will save Zion and build up the cities of Judah, and people shall dwell there and possess it; <sup>36</sup> the offspring of his servants shall inherit it, and those who love his name shall dwell in it.