

WNBS: Foundations & Formation

Imprecatory Psalms Study Guide

Bringing Our Pain Before God and Trusting His Justice

Focus: Understanding what the Imprecatory Psalms teach us about injustice, honest prayer, and trusting God when we have been wronged.

Opening question: Have you ever been so hurt by someone that you struggled to find the words to pray?

I. What Is an Imprecatory Psalm

An imprecatory psalm is a psalm that calls upon God to judge, punish, or overthrow the wicked and the enemies of His people. The word imprecation refers to a curse or an appeal for judgment against someone.

These prayers contain strong language because they address serious wrongs: violence, betrayal, oppression, false accusations, and the destruction of communities. They bring those wrongs before God and appeal to Him to act.

- The central concern: God, will You confront this evil and defend those who are suffering?
- The expression of faith: The psalmist still turns to God, even when overwhelmed by anger or grief.
- The teaching distinction: These are appeals for divine judgment; they do not authorize us to carry out personal revenge.

Key Point: We can bring our deepest pain before God without pretending that what happened to us was acceptable.

II. Which Psalms Are Imprecatory and Who Wrote Them

There is no single universally agreed-upon list. Some psalms contain extended appeals for judgment; others contain only a few imprecatory verses. Commonly studied examples include Psalms 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 79, 83, 109, and 137. Other lists include Psalms 5, 10, 17, 70, 129, and 140.

The authorship descriptions on the following page follow the traditional attributions in the psalm titles. These titles do not always establish the precise historical circumstances of composition.

Psalms and Traditional Attributions

Psalm	Attribution	Main concern
35	David	Unjust opposition, malicious witnesses, and enemies who repay good with evil.
55	David	Violence and the deep pain of betrayal by a close companion.

58	David	Corrupt judgment and wickedness among those responsible for justice.
59	David	Deliverance from violent enemies. Its title connects it with Saul sending men to watch David's house and kill him.
69	David	Overwhelming suffering, hostility, humiliation, and appeals for judgment.
79	Asaph	The devastation of Jerusalem, the defilement of the temple, and the killing of God's people.
83	Asaph	Nations conspiring to destroy Israel.
109	David	Deceit, accusations, hatred, and cruelty toward the vulnerable.
137	Unnamed	The grief of Babylonian captivity and a severe appeal for retribution against Babylon.

Authorship clarification: *Psalms associated with Asaph belong to the Asaphite worship tradition; the attribution may connect a psalm with Asaph or his continuing musical community. Psalm 137 does not name its author in the Hebrew text, so we should not confidently assign it to David or another individual.*

III. Why Were These Psalms Written

A. To ask God to defend people facing injustice

Psalm 35:1–10

The psalmist brings his case before God and asks Him to intervene against those seeking his harm.

- Wrongdoing is named openly.
- The suffering person appeals to God for protection and vindication.
- God is approached as the One who can rescue those who are overpowered.

Key Point: Faith gives us a place to bring the wrongs we cannot correct on our own.

B. To express the pain of betrayal

Psalm 55:12–14, 20–23

The hurt in this psalm comes from someone who had shared friendship and worship with the psalmist.

- Betrayal by someone close can wound us deeply.
- The psalm brings that pain into prayer.
- The call to cast one's burden upon the Lord appears within this painful situation.

Key Point: Being hurt does not mean we have failed in our faith. We can bring the wound to God.

C. To confront corrupt power and persistent evil

Psalm 58:1–11

This psalm challenges those who pervert justice and asks God to break the power of the wicked.

- Position and influence do not place anyone beyond God's judgment.
- The suffering of those harmed by corrupt leadership matters.
- The closing verse affirms that God judges the earth.

Key Point: God's justice matters wherever power is being used to harm others.

III. Why Were These Psalms Written continued

D. To voice the suffering of an entire community

Psalm 79:1–13

Psalm 79 describes destruction, bloodshed, and public humiliation. Alongside its request for judgment, the community asks God for mercy, forgiveness, and deliverance.

- These prayers concern more than personal disputes.
- They give a suffering community words to pray together.
- Seeking justice can accompany confession of our own sins.

Key Point: We can ask God to confront injustice while remaining humble about our own need for mercy.

E. To ask that God's authority be recognized

Psalm 83:16–18

Psalm 83 asks God to defeat hostile plans. Verse 16 also asks that the enemies seek God's name, while verse 18 looks toward recognition of His rule over the earth.

Key Point: Our prayers can ask God to stop wrongdoing and bring wrongdoers to acknowledge Him.

IV. How Do We Understand the Harsh Language

A. Read the whole psalm

Before focusing on a severe verse, identify the suffering that led to the prayer. Notice the appeals for help, expressions of trust, and promises of praise surrounding it.

B. Take the severity seriously

Some passages ask for devastating judgment, including consequences for an enemy's family. Psalm 109:6–15 is especially difficult. We should acknowledge what the words say and avoid turning them into casual expressions to use against people who upset us.

C. Address Psalm 137 honestly

Psalm 137 moves from grief in exile to a shocking wish for violence against Babylon's children. Its final verses express the horror and retaliatory anger associated with national devastation. The text is difficult, and its inclusion in Scripture is not an instruction for believers to harm children or reproduce Babylon's cruelty.

D. Distinguish the ancient prayer from our present application

Christians differ over how directly these judgments should be prayed today. A responsible approach is to bring our anger to God, ask Him to stop evil, and submit the outcome to His wisdom. We should not assume that every person who opposes us is an enemy of God.

V. Applying These Psalms in Our Faith Journey

A. Be honest with God about what hurts

Psalms 55:1–8, 22

Name the betrayal, fear, anger, or disappointment you are carrying. Prayer does not require polished language.

Personal application: “Lord, this hurt me deeply. Help me bring it before You honestly.”

B. Entrust your case to God

Psalms 35:1, 23–24

Ask God to reveal truth and establish justice. Resist allowing the desire to get even to direct your decisions.

Personal application: Before responding to an accusation, pause, pray, and consider what a truthful and faithful response requires.

C. Ask God to stop harm and protect the vulnerable

Psalms 109:16, 31

Psalms 109 identifies cruelty toward the poor and needy and closes with confidence that God stands beside the poor.

Personal application: Pray specifically for those experiencing oppression, and support practical efforts that protect them.

D. Examine your own heart

Psalms 79:8–9

The community asks for judgment against its enemies while also seeking forgiveness.

Personal application: Ask, “Am I seeking what is right? Am I willing to let God correct me, too?”

E. Leave room for repentance

Psalms 83:16

Ask God to interrupt destructive behavior and bring those responsible to seek Him.

Personal application: “Lord, stop the harm, expose the truth, and bring a change of heart.”

F. Continue trusting God while the situation remains unresolved

Psalms 59:16–17

The psalmist speaks of God’s strength, mercy, and protection amid danger.

Personal application: Continue in prayer and worship while taking wise steps toward safety, support, and accountability. Trusting God does not require remaining exposed to harm.

VI. Reflection

1. What makes these psalms difficult for us to read or pray?

2. How can we recognize the difference between seeking justice and wanting revenge?

3. What does Psalm 79 teach us about asking for justice with humility?

4. How does Psalm 83:16 shape the way we pray for someone who has caused harm?

5. What burden do you need to place before God this week?

References

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