

Foreword

The parts of the Bible that make us the most uncomfortable are the parts of the Bible that reveal what we truly believe about the Bible—and the God who gave it as a gift to his people.

It is relatively easy to affirm, celebrate, and integrate into our belief and practice those passages that say the things with which we already agree, the things toward which we are already culturally or theologically disposed. But when we are confronted in Scripture with a God who surprises us, an ethic that shocks us, a calling that disconcerts us—well, those are the moments that clarify for us whether we are truly willing to receive the Word of the Lord, even when His voice sounds different from the one in our head.

The instinctive temptation is to respond to such texts by looking for an interpretive escape hatch that keeps our prior, comfortable understanding intact. Perhaps we relegate the Old Testament to the status of second-class Scripture. Or we attribute a passage to ancient cultural assumptions and biases. Or we assure ourselves that the author is not endorsing what he reports, without devoting due attention to the evaluative signals integrated into the literary shape of the text. Or we run everything through the filter of our own personal understanding of Jesus, diminishing the authority of anything that does not align with our preferred (and usually quite selective) portrait of what God must be like. More often than not, I suspect, we do not even consciously acknowledge to ourselves what we are doing or what the theological implications of our interpretive moves may be, but we can nevertheless be quite creative in escaping God's claim over our minds and hearts and bodies and lives.

There is another problematic way to respond to problematic passages. Sometimes, whether from fear or doubt or anxiety or cognitive dissonance, we simply turn the page, ignore the problem, pretend that the passage is not really there, act as if God has not actually spoken those words to us, and move on to brighter biblical pastures. We do not have to wrestle with a God whom we have functionally prohibited from contradicting us. But, if the Word of God is in fact the Word of God—true, trustworthy, authoritative, and good in all that it teaches—then wrestling is precisely what we must do when what it teaches defies what we expect.

To be sure, faithfully discerning what it teaches requires care, skill, and wisdom. Description does not necessarily entail prescription. Cultural context matters. Redemptive-historical shifts must be taken into account. But such legitimate affirmations do not always assuage our concerns, and after we have soberly considered how and what the passage is communicating, sometimes the offense stubbornly lingers. Some texts refuse to be tamed. And in those cases, it takes more faith to confront our doubts, name our fears, and press still more deeply into God's self-revelation than it does to neglect part of His Scripture, protect God from our questions, and protect ourselves from His answers. An abiding trust in God and His Word will humbly, honestly, patiently, self-critically interrogate the hard places with confidence that, though the struggle may take time, there is beauty to be found there. Such faith wrestles with the surprising God of the Bible and, persevering with His Word, declares with Jacob, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Gen. 32:26).

The imprecatory psalms are, for most modern readers, a most uncomfortable part of the Bible—one of those parts that exposes us as it reveals God. They resist our escape hatch maneuvers and demand that we wrestle with the God who speaks to us in the Psalter's prayerful speech to God. And Ryan Swale has wrestled with God in the imprecatory psalms. With this book, he models for us the faith that refuses to look away from the Bible's cries for divine vengeance and that perseveres toward renewed understanding and expanded worship. He not only deals with the relevant biblical data

across both testaments and addresses head-on the most pressing questions these petitions for justice evoke within us. He goes deeper still, demonstrating the beauty of the imprecations' hope-filled portrait of God and the beauty of what they might cultivate within Christians and churches if we can muster the courage to pray them and the humility to pray them rightly.

The imprecatory psalms awaken us from our consumeristic slumber and alert us to the harsh realities of a violent world. They sweep us up into a story and a calling that is far grander than our personal narratives and life goals. They direct us to a God who is more committed to justice than we are, to a Christ who bears the burden of injustice (in more ways than one), to the King who will one day renew the cosmos and wipe away every injustice along with every tear. They bear witness to the inescapable longing of every human heart that evil would be defeated and that righteousness would triumph, even as they offer a vision of reality in which those longings finally make sense and shall come to fruition. They supply scripts for naming, grieving, protesting catastrophic wrongs and moving toward healing in communion with God and His people. Their prayers are desired by God, heard by God, accepted by God, responded to by God, and integrated into the outworking of His purposes for creation and history.

But we will never know these rich blessings until we, too, take the uncomfortable but profoundly faith-full step of acknowledging our questions, facing our fears, and wrestling with God in the imprecatory psalms. With Swale's work as a dependable guide, we will find in the struggle that the God who meets us there is worthy of our trust, our praise, and our petitions for justice. We will taste and see that the Lord of the imprecatory psalms is indeed good, and that He has given us His justice prayers for our good, the good of His church, the good of the world.

TREVOR LAURENCE
Executive Director,
Catechesia Institute

INTRODUCTION:

Imprecatory *What?*

In a small Middle-Eastern town an enemy of Christ unleashes another violent massacre on the leaders of God's people. For these men (including their wives and children, even infants), the price of their loyalty to God's Anointed is paid in blood. Hundreds are killed in this senseless massacre. A whole town is destroyed. And the man responsible for it *boasts* of his violence.

How would God desire His people to respond in the wake of such evil? We don't have to wonder. The story recounted above is the story of 1 Samuel 22 where Doeg the Edomite, at the instruction of King Saul, wipes out 85 priests in a single day, along with their wives and infant children, for assisting David by giving him bread. It reminds us of the massacre of the innocents in Matthew 2 and the slaughter of David's descendants by Athaliah in 2 Kings 11. Indeed, this sort of scene has replayed itself over and over throughout the history of the church. Yet God, in His grace, has not left His people without words to sing on such occasions.

In Psalm 52, God has provided the Spirit-inspired song David penned in the aftermath of that massacre. The superscription says, "To the choirmaster. A maskil of David, when Doeg, the Edomite, came and told Saul, 'David has come to the house of Ahimelech.'" In this psalm, David names and laments the evil that Doeg and Saul have committed, then takes heart in the fact that God will "break them down forever" (Ps. 52:5). He says the righteous will see and fear, and *laugh*, when God does this (Ps. 52:6). According

to David, the prospect of the coming justice of God is a source of comfort in the wake of such horrific evil.

In fact, three things are noteworthy in this psalm: (1) David commits it to the choirmaster, inviting God's people to sing it on other such occasions when the enemies of God unleash this kind of violence against them; (2) he calls it a "maskil," which has the idea of a wisdom psalm, or psalm of instruction, thus educating God's people in how to respond to such evil;¹ and (3) the beginning and end of the psalm refer to God's steadfast *love* (vv. 1, 8) which leads us to conclude that the carrying out of God's justice is an expression of His love. In the aftermath of the events of 1 Samuel 22 (and others like them throughout the history of the church), the coming justice of God who *loves* His people brings comfort.

Andrew Peterson puts this well in his song "Rise Up," when he says:

If a thief had come to plunder when the children were alone,
if he ravaged every daughter and murdered every son,
would not their father see this? Would not his anger burn?
Would he not repay the tyrant in the day of his return?²

He speaks of how the King of Love will one day crush them all.

Every stone that makes you stumble and cuts you when you fall,
every serpent here that strikes your heel to curse you when you crawl,
the King of Love will one day crush them all.

This is the same hope to which David directs God's persecuted people in Psalm 52.

Perhaps you've read the Psalms before and wondered, "What am I to do with all of this language of vengeance?" How is it that the same person who delights in God's steadfast love could, just a couple verses later, delight in His justice? Or how is it that the psalmist, in so many of the psalms, actually *prays* for that justice? This gets at the difficult matter of what theologians call the "imprecatory psalms":

1. See Peter Holtvliwer, ed., *Christ's Psalms, Our Psalms: Study Resource*, vol. 2 (Carman Manitoba: Reformed Perspective Press, 2020) 99.

2. Andrew Peterson, "Rise Up," *Resurrection Letters*, vol. 1 (Centricity Music 2018).

psalms that, in whole or in part, invoke the divine vengeance, asking God to unleash His judgment on His enemies.

While these psalms may make us uncomfortable, they comprise between 20 and 25 per cent of the Psalter, and therefore may not be ignored. If we would rightly understand and rightly make use of the Psalter, we need to get a grasp on how to understand these psalms.

Much has been written that helpfully demonstrates the ethical permissibility of using the imprecatory psalms (i.e., of singing and praying them). However, the burden of this book is not just to argue for the *permissibility* of using the imprecatory psalms but the *necessity* of doing so. I agree with Dale Ralph Davis who, writing on the so-called “nasty texts” of the Old Testament (which are either too racy, too gory, or too severe), says “avoidance gets us nowhere and impoverishes the church.”³ We must not be afraid to wade into these difficult texts, “for it’s in the nasty stuff you’ll find the God of scary holiness and incredible grace waiting to reveal himself.”⁴ I believe the same applies to the imprecatory psalms. Not only are they permissible for the Christian to use, they are a vital resource for the ministry of the church and its leaders in counseling, preaching, praying, leading in worship, and witnessing to the world around us about God’s justice. In them, the God of scary holiness and incredible grace waits to reveal Himself.

In making this case, Part 1 of this book will deal with some of the necessary theological questions related to the imprecatory psalms, as I seek to establish the permissibility of using them. The heart of this book, however, is Part 2, which will show the *profitability* of using these psalms for each of these areas of Christian life and ministry. My prayer is that pastors and church leaders (indeed, *all* Christians) will come away with a deepened understanding of the imprecatory psalms and a newfound desire to employ them in the various aspects of life and ministry for their own spiritual maturing and for the glory of God.

3. Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Flesh: How to Preach from Old Testament Narrative Texts* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2006), 62.

4. *Ibid.*, 74.

