

IMPRECATIONS: HOLY FIRE

by Prof. John M. Frame

Imprecations, prayers calling down God's wrath upon the wicked, are found in the New Testament as well as the Old, on the lips of Christ and the apostles as well as the Psalmists (see Matt. 23:13ff.; Gal. 1:8ff.; Rev. 6:10; 18:20). On the other hand, the biblical ethic of love is also found in both Testaments. Scripture always proscribes personal vengeance¹ and calls us to love our enemies (Exod. 23:4ff.; Lev. 19:17ff.; Ps. 7:4ff.; Prov. 20:22). So, the problem we have in reconciling these two biblical themes cannot be met by some view of "dispensational change" since both covenants are spanned.

Jesus did refuse to exercise divine vengeance during his earthly life because he came not to judge the world, but to save. He rebuked his disciples who wanted to call down fire from heaven upon a city that rejected them (Luke 9:54ff.), but he did promise judgment on unbelieving cities in the last day (Matt. 11:20-24). In these passages we learn that Jesus' first advent was not to bring vengeance, but that ultimate vengeance is postponed until his return (which will be vengeful, 2 Thess. 1:6-10). But these observations in themselves neither authorize nor forbid the use of imprecatory prayers today.

Nor is it a sufficient solution to say that the imprecatory Psalms are prayers of Christ himself through his people. While this is true in a sense, that merely raises the same question (the love/justice relation) again with respect to Christ's own motives, and it renders problematic the use of such sentiments in free, uninspired prayer.

I was helped by J. A. Motyer in Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, *ad loc.*, who reminds us of the larger biblical pattern: "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord." The imprecatory Psalms, he points out, are prayers, calling upon God to remedy those injustices which neither we as individuals, nor the state, are competent to remedy. They do not seek personal vengeance; rather they leave vengeance to God, as God has demanded.

Imprecatory prayers are like all prayers in that there is always the qualification implicit in the phrases "thy will be done" or "in Jesus' name." When we ask for things, we should do it with the realization that our ultimate desire is God's glory. If God will be glorified in giving us our request, then we thank him; if he is more glorified in denying our request, our prayer has not thereby become useless; for all prayer is a recommitment to God's purpose, his kingdom. The Lord's Prayer beautifully exemplifies this spirit.

¹ Of course, the state is given the power to carry out divine vengeance in limited ways. See Rom. 13.

Practically speaking, we discover that someone is guilty of a great injustice that we are not able to deal with in our own strength. Our response is, through biblical imprecations, to share this concern with God. In doing so, we share God's evaluation of injustice: "Because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient" (Eph. 5:6). And so we call for divine vengeance to be exercised: not by ourselves, but by God.

Can we *love* an enemy and still call for God's wrath against him? Is a desire for divine judgment consistent with a desire for our enemy's salvation? The psychology of it is difficult, to be sure. But consider this example: When the dictator of the late 70's Idi Amin went abroad in Uganda, killing Christians right and left simply to satisfy his personal hatred, many Christians prayed that God would bring vengeance upon him. Such vengeance, of course, does not, either in the Psalms or in our example, necessarily entail ultimate damnation. The prayer is primarily for a *historical* judgment. Though historical judgment is not entirely divorced in the biblical mind from ultimate damnation, the two are not inseparably conjoined either.

But what if God had converted Amin, instead of judging him? Would those Christians have been disappointed? Surely not; they would have glorified God for answering their prayer beyond their wildest expectations. How so?

- (1) In one sense, such a conversion would have precisely brought vengeance against this man, a vengeance visited by God's grace upon Christ in his atoning sacrifice.
- (2) Their prayer would have been answered in that Amin the persecutor would have received the sharpest divine rebuke (cf. "Saul, why do you persecute me?") and a historical defeat for his murderous regime.
- (3) Their prayer would have been answered in that their deepest desire was the glory of God.

Should the Christians, then, have prayed for his salvation rather than his judgment? No. Prayer is often somewhat immediate, and rightly so. Of course, Christians sometimes get into a mood where they start praying for all sorts of wild things: the conversion of people like Hitler, the conversion of all the members of the U.S. Congress, the coming of Christ at 6 p.m. tonight, and so on. I do not rebuke the naive, immature faith that motivates such prayers. God often gives special help to those who are children at heart. Indeed, there are even times when the prayer of mature believers properly anticipates the broad sweep of history: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven." But most often, prayer is based on our hopes for the near-term. And biblical prayer follows this pattern: it is often realistically short-term in its expectations. We see a situation before us, and we make a tentative judgment, based on our understanding of God's usual workings (from Scripture and providence), as to what help we might reasonably expect. When Peter was in prison, the church prayed for his release, not for the conversion of every person in the correctional system.

When Amin was ravaging the church, the immediate need was for judgment. Though one with a great childlike faith might have anticipated the possibility of Amin's conversion, to most Christians that was not an immediate possibility, even taking account of the riches of God's grace. Amin was a militant Muslim, a hater of all things Christian, and mentally irrational to boot. Yes, God's grace has converted hopeless cases before; but this was not a time for considering big theological possibilities. It was time for an earnest cry for help, based on present realities in the light of Scripture. The best short-term possibility was judgment: the death of Amin or his expulsion from the country. So the prayer of these believers often did not explicitly include his conversion. But as I said earlier, their prayer did not exclude that either; indeed that possibility was always implicit in the nature of divine judgment (which provides for and offers atonement), in the nature of salvation (which is always a judgment upon sin), and in the qualification "thy will be done." I suspect that this is also the way the earliest believers prayed for Saul the persecutor.

What about the "hatred" expressed in the imprecatory Psalms (e.g., 139:21ff.)? How is this compatible with Jesus' command to love, not hate, our enemies? Again, as we have distinguished between personal and divine vengeance, I think we must distinguish between two kinds of hatred. Love and hate in Scripture are not so much emotions as patterns of behavior. To love is to seek another's ultimate benefit; to hate is to seek his destruction. When we pray for divine vengeance, granting all the above qualifications on that prayer, we are seeking the destruction of an enemy of God. We are "hating" that person. But in our individual relationships with that person, in which vengeance is excluded, we are to love, to seek what is best for our enemy. So, Scripture similarly distinguishes between good and bad anger: the quickly aroused, difficult to extinguish, murderous anger of personal vengeance (Matt. 5:22), and the slowly aroused, easily extinguished, righteous anger of God's servants defending His honor (Eph. 4:26), which is like the anger of God itself. With these qualifications, hatred and love are not contrary to one another in every respect. It is possible to have a godly hatred and a godly love toward the same person, paradoxical as that seems.

We today may be called to cry for divine justice: against abortionists and abortion advocates, against homosexual militants who try to destroy the church's freedom to proclaim God's word, against the remaining anti-Christian dictators of the world. We crave great historical signs of God's displeasure with injustice. That desire is quite legitimate. And if God pleases instead to rebuke these movements by sending revival and converting the hearts of His enemies, our desire for divine judgment will be completely fulfilled. But in our cry for divine justice, the imprecatory Psalms will rightly guide our prayers.