

By the Rivers of Babylon Psalms of Imprecation

Please remember that the participant guide includes more information and topics than can be covered in a normal 45-minute Sunday School class. This is purposeful and is designed to give participants additional materials to study throughout the week if they wish.

Please review the lesson and pick which sections you would like your class to focus on. In this lesson, it is recommended that you do the introduction, either section I or II, and then sections III-V. Alternatively, you could do both examples of imprecation psalms (I-II) and leave out the section titled "Imprecations in Canonical Context" (IV). This lesson has slightly fewer discussion questions than previous lessons and so it is possible that you'll have time to do all five sections.

Welcome & Prayer

- Allow class to gather and have fellowship.
- By 10:00am at the latest, convene everyone for general announcements and attendance.
- Be sure to introduce yourself to the class. If guests are present, it would be appropriate to go around and have everyone introduce themselves (just names for brevity).
- Remind everyone about the First in Focus series and how it works. For instance:
 - "First in Focus is a special six-week Sunday School series designed to generate church-wide conversations around important topics in Christian faith and theology. In weeks 1 and 6, all participants gather for a lecture in Fifield Hall. In weeks 2-5, participants meet in their individual Sunday School classes to explore the topic further with the help of a curriculum."
 - "This is week 4 and in it we'll be exploring what are known as psalms of imprecation, which can be understood as a subtype within the broader category of psalms of disorientation."
- Lead class in a brief prayer.

Introduction

- Handout this week's curriculum (printed copies are available in the classroom).
 - Please note that e-book versions of the participant's guide are also available on the web at: <http://firstpresatl.org/learn/firstinfocus/prayingthepsalms/>
- Read, or have someone else in the class read, the **Introduction** and the **Lesson at a Glance** sections printed in the curriculum.
 - Remember that some SS participants may NOT have been present for the previous week of this study. As a result, you may wish to offer additional comments of your own to help give a sense of what was covered during the week 3.
 - An e-book version of the participant's guide for week 3 is available online. See <http://firstpresatl.org/learn/firstinfocus/prayingthepsalms/>
- Pose the **Conversation Starter** question to the class.
 - This is optional – feel free to move directly to section I, which deals with the most familiar psalm of imprecation.

- The goal of this question is to get individuals to begin to think about if they have ever encountered words of imprecation before. Such words are not only found in the Psalter but are also expressed in secular music, poetry, literature, civil protest, etc. In preparation for the class you may wish to think of some examples.

I. Example 1 – Psalm 137

- Background: Psalm 137 is the quintessential psalm of imprecation. The setting for this psalm is a lament over the destruction of Jerusalem by those Israelites who were exiled to Babylon. The mourners are portrayed as weeping “by the rivers of Babylon”—this may refer to one of the two major rivers in Babylon (the Tigris and Euphrates) or perhaps one of the many irrigation canals that were used in the country.
- Read the opening text and then read Psalm 137:1-6 with its accompanying question.
 - In the opening stanza the poet recalls how the Israelites refused to sing their sacred songs on foreign soil for the amusement of their conquerors.
 - It is also possible that the Israelites refused to sing these songs because they felt they could no longer trust in the promises uttered in them. Recall that the songs of Zion speak of the inviolability of Jerusalem and how God would protect and preserve this “holy habitation” on behalf of his people. The fall of Jerusalem in 586 would have called this promise into question.
- Read (or have someone else read) the next block of text.
 - The first 6 verses are typically seen as a lament, with the imprecation being reserved for the final 3 verses. However, it is better to read vv. 5-6 as a type of self-imprecation in which the psalmist calls a curse upon himself should he ever forget his beloved Jerusalem.
 - The parts of the body targeted in the curse are likely intentional – the hand and the tongue are needed for making music. In effect, the curse is saying: may I never be able to make music again – of any type! – if I should forget Jerusalem.
- Read Psalm 137:7-9 and pose the accompanying question.
 - The psalmist’s unyielding hatred of her foes (Babylon and Edom) was the correlate of her intense love for Zion.
 - The shocking form in which the psalmist expresses her desire for retaliation may reflect the hope for the end of Babylonian oppression – if babies are killed now, in the future the Babylonians would no longer be able to maintain a standing army to subjugate the Israelites.
 - Some scholars have suggested that the “little ones” mentioned in v. 9 should be understood as adult citizens, depicted as the “children” of Mother Babylon.
 - It also could be that the killing of babies was seen as the most extreme form of retaliation.
- Read the next block of text and pose the accompanying discussion question.
 - It is likely that the targeting of little ones in v. 9 reflects an eye-for-an-eye understanding of justice (*lex talionis* in Latin). In this view, the form of Babylon’s punishment should match the form of their transgression. The implication here is that Babylon would have killed Israelite little ones during their destruction of Jerusalem in 586.
 - The question invites participants to consider whether they think it is a good idea to censor verses 7-9 out of Christian hymnody.
 - As participants answer this question, encourage them to give the reason for their position.

II. Example 2 – Psalm 109

- Background: The situation imagined in this imprecation is of an individual (the psalmist) who is falsely accused by his enemies in a court of law. While Psalm 137 was a communal prayer of imprecation, Psalm 109 is an individual prayer of imprecation. The implied suffering is personal, not national.
- Read Psalm 109:6-19.
 - You may wish to include vv. 1-5 in the reading as well. You also may wish to read the following block of text *before* the biblical verses are read.
 - Some interpreters have suggested that vv. 6-19 come from the psalmist himself and represent a series of curses from the psalmist against his enemies. However, it is more likely that the “him” mentioned in v. 6a is the psalmist, while the words quoted in vv. 6-19 are from the enemy.
 - In Hebrew, the word *satan* simply means “accuser.” This term is most familiar from the opening chapters of the book of Job. It is only in later Christian tradition that the *satan* is associated with the concept of the devil.
- Read the next block of text and pose the accompanying discussion question.
 - In asking participants to reflect on times in which they have been falsely accused, this question tries to help participants with the feelings of hurt, oppression, and desperation that ultimately fuel the imprecation that follows.
 - While doing so does not justify violent retaliation, it does help us better understand the context in which such invocations of evil emerge.
- Read the final block of text and Psalm 109:20-31.
 - Note that there are two discussion questions associated with this text. Feel free to focus on one or the other for the sake of time.
 - Reversal motifs can be seen in v. 28a (enemies curse, God blesses), v. 28b (the enemies are now put to shame), v. 29 (enemies clothed with dishonor), v. 30 (false accusations were aimed at the psalmist, but now the psalmist utters words of praise).
 - God’s reputation: v. 21
 - Compassion: vv. 22-25
 - Steadfast love: vv. 21, 26
 - Sense of justice: v. 31

III. Imprecations in Historical Context

- Background: The goal of this section is to help participants better understand the historical context from which these prayers of imprecation emerged. This includes a consideration of the identity and nature of the enemies named in these psalms.
- Read the first block of text, Psalm 83:1-8, and pose the accompanying question.
 - This text names 10 nations bent on annihilating Israel; 10 is a symbolic number and does not necessarily reflect a single historical situation. This is something of a cumulative list of stereotypical enemies of Israel. Similar lists are found in the books of Joshua and Judges (see Josh 3:10).
- Read the next block of text, which explains the geopolitical context of psalms of imprecation.
 - Note that there is a single discussion question for this block of text and the one that follows.
 - Though it is difficult to date the psalms, it is likely that most psalms of imprecation were developed during or just after the Babylonian exile.

- The point of this commentary is to emphasize that ancient Israel had absolutely no political or military recourse against its enemies. In other words, while Israel might have imagined the killing of Babylonian little ones, they would not have been able to carry out such an act.
- In this way, psalms of imprecation are actually forms of nonviolence insofar as they bring violent wishes to God rather than carry them out.
- Read Psalm 94:1-7 and the next block of text.
 - The point of this commentary is to emphasize that the enemies in psalms of imprecation are not just ruthless empires but also those who oppress the most vulnerable members of Israelite society – orphans, widows, and the stranger (i.e., resident aliens).
 - This type of enemy might include fellow Israelites.
 - In light of God's steadfast compassion for and commitment to the orphan, widow, and stranger, psalms of imprecation can be understood as a protest against unchecked injustice in the world.
- Pose the final discussion question, which asks participants to reflect on the two previous blocks of commentary.

IV. Imprecations in Canonical Context

- Background: The goal of this section is to explore how the tone and content of psalms of imprecation can be understood in light of the broader witness of Scripture.
- Read Psalm 58:6-10 and Matt 5:39-44 and pose the accompanying question.
 - The question here invites participants to wrestle with and try to make sense of these sharply different views of the enemies.
 - Matt 5:39-44 comes from Jesus' famous sermon on the mount.
- Read the next block of text, which describes two common ways Christians deal with the seemingly unresolvable contradiction between the above two passages.
 - Ask participants to reflect on the potential drawbacks and deficiencies of these responses.
 - Response 1 effectively creates a canon within a canon. Even if the psalms of imprecation are never mentioned in Christian circles, similar invocations of violence can be found elsewhere in Scripture, including Num 10:35; Judg 5:21; Jer 18:19-20; and Lam 3:64-66.
 - Response 2 potentially reinforces misguided characterizations of Judaism and fuels what is known as supersessionism – i.e., the idea that the NT completely replaces and repudiates all aspects of the OT. Among other things, this view overlooks the fact that there are expressions of imprecation in the NT as well (Matt 10:14-15; 1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8).
- Read the final block of text.
 - Due to space limitations, there is no accompanying discussion question.
 - However, you may wish to ask participants to read Psalm 138 and reflect on how it relates to Psalm 137.
 - The overall point of this section is to emphasize that psalms of imprecation do not have the last word on violence when seen from a canonical perspective. Even within the Psalter itself, psalms of imprecation are balanced, and perhaps even critiqued, by a kinder, more gentle view of the enemy / foreign nations.

V. Imprecations in Theological Context

- Background: The goal of this section is to encourage participants to consider if psalms of imprecation have any theological value in Christian circles despite the many difficulties they present.
- Read the first block of text and the list of 3 possible values of imprecation psalms.
 - Note that this section includes a lot of commentary before the final discussion question is posed.
 - Possibility 1: However distasteful psalms of imprecation may be to us, it is important that we remember that the suffering that lies behind them is real. There are people in our world – and in our communities – who have suffered so deeply and have so little recourse that praying these psalms makes sense. The church should be mobilized to care for those whose life circumstances drive them to the point of praying psalms of imprecation.
 - Possibility 2: Reading psalms of imprecation should re-sensitize us to the reality of injustice and oppression in the world. It encourages us to not only care for the victims of such oppression and injustice, but also to consider the causes of these experiences. While violent retaliation should be avoided (remember the violence of these psalms is given over to God, not carried out by human actors), it can nevertheless be helpful to identify the “enemies” of justice today, whether in the form of people, systems, or ideas.
 - Possibility 3: OT scholars Ellen Davis (Duke Divinity School) suggests that when reading psalms of imprecation, Christians should be willing to ask: Is there someone out there praying this psalms against me? Doing so invites us to be more self-reflective about the ways we might contribute to the suffering of others, whether purposefully or unknowingly. Doing so would also move us toward confession and reconciliation.
- Pose the final discussion question, leaving room for participants to interact with the content of this final section and to add their own thoughts and suggestions.