



SECOND EDITION

WAR PSALMS

of the

PRINCE OF PEACE

Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms



JAMES E. ADAMS

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SDG

*To my wife,
Nancy Anne Radu de Adams,
“bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,”
whose participation in the composition
of this volume makes it our book.*

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Foreword

I CANNOT ENTHUSIASTICALLY ENOUGH commend Jim Adams (no relative of mine except in the Second Adam) for the work he has done in dealing with a difficult and all-too-often neglected area of preaching! And, of even greater importance, he has done so sympathetically and biblically.

Pastor, how often have you shied away from preaching on these large tracts of scriptural turf called the “imprecatory psalms”? How often have you wondered how they could be a part of the Word of God? Well, you have to wonder no longer; you need avoid them no more—*War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* will both explain their purpose and teach you how to proclaim God’s truth from them.

This book has been needed for quite a long time. At last you have the privilege of reading it. While it is not always pleasant reading—because of the human wickedness and rebellion that occasioned these psalms—you will find Dr. Adams’s work both instructive and invaluable.

Jay E. Adams

Preface

MY SPECIAL INTEREST IN THE IMPRECATORY PSALMS was sparked by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in the summer of 1969. In his last message at a pastors' conference in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Dr. Lloyd-Jones, preaching with resonant voice and relevant insight, said to us:

Look at the psalmist. Look at some of those imprecatory psalms. What are they? There is nothing wrong with them. It's just the zeal of the psalmist. He's grieved and troubled because these people are not honoring God as they should be. That's his supreme concern.¹

Dr. Lloyd-Jones's words prompted me to look at the imprecatory psalms again. As I read them, I was awed by these dramatic prayers for the annihilation of enemies. I gained a deeper appreciation for the Psalms in general, but I remained at a loss about how certain psalms should be prayed and preached. I knew that all of our preaching and teaching of God's Word must come from the context of God's great love and the forgiveness we find in Jesus Christ. But how was I to pray and preach psalms of vengeance?

In the summer of 1983, I chose the imprecatory psalms as my area of specialization for the Doctor of Ministry program at Westminster Seminary in California, and so began my formal study of them. I found that many theological disputes spring from the Psalms. One of the most important of these concerns who is

speaking the psalms of imprecation. The title and historical setting of various psalms help determine the human author, but are these *merely* human words? This is a crucial issue. On the one hand, if Christ is the speaker, how can the “guilty” (penitential) psalms be understood? On the other hand, if David alone is the speaker, what do we do with the “self-righteous” words of the psalms? Scholars have wrestled with these problems for centuries.

On a more personal level, the most penetrating question I needed to answer for myself and others was, What is our relationship as Christians to the Psalms today? We need more than a passive understanding to satisfy our minds: we need instruction for *living!*

Christians everywhere read the Psalms with much enjoyment and personal blessing. But as the Psalms are studied and considered in more detail, perplexing questions inevitably arise. Many people in the congregations where I’ve pastored have expressed misgivings and bewilderment over the curses found in the Psalms. One of the purposes of this book is to provide a biblical response to such concerns.

I began my studies of the imprecatory psalms by reading them through many times, trying to determine their intrinsic significance as first written by the psalmist under divine inspiration. I studied these cries for justice in the original Hebrew text, as well as in some fifteen different translations. I read hundreds of commentaries and every article I could find, and as you can imagine, I exposed myself to many differing points of view!

I thank God that we have a great heritage of Christ-exalting literature on the Psalms. Unfortunately, many people have dismissed this literature in toto because it contains occasional fanciful interpretations or exegetical quirks. Although both Augustine and Luther have quirks and fanciful thoughts at times, anyone who dismisses their contributions deprives themselves of great riches. Part of the wealth of Spurgeon’s *Treasury of David* is the “Quaint Sayings” he mined and compiled from previous literature

on the Psalms. Of more modern literature I have quoted several segments from the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, although I stand opposed to the theological camp with which he is often identified. To have ignored his profound insights would, I believe, have been an unjustifiable loss to writer and readers alike.

Before putting into print the answers that I believe Scripture gives us to the puzzling prayers of the Psalms, I first taught these principles and applications in a theological seminary several years ago. In addition, I have given seminars on the imprecatory Psalms in the United States and parts of Latin America. Some of the pastors I've had the privilege of instructing in these seminars have become so excited with these truths that they've begun to preach Christ from the Psalms for the first time. Many have requested that this book be published not just in English, but in Spanish as well. One dear Colombian pastor was astonished to see how these psalms address the social needs of the suffering people of God in his country. He said, "Latin America needs to learn how to cry to God for justice and vindication in the name of Christ. No one has ever taught us to understand and preach Christ from these psalms!"

To my knowledge, this is the first book of its kind in the English language. I hope it will be the first of many, since there is so much more to be discovered and said than can possibly be contained in a single book. I pray that it may stimulate further study, prayer, preaching, and writing on the Psalms.

May God give us tears of love as we pray and preach these imprecatory psalms. Many ministers have cast them off, abandoning this part of God's Word, with deadly results in their flocks. I believe with all my heart that embracing and proclaiming anew the essential truths taught here will climax in the prosperity and advancement of the kingdom of God on the earth. When these holy prayers are again prayed in the Spirit and with understanding, there will come unsuspected power and glory to the church of Christ.

Break the teeth in their mouths, O God; tear out, O LORD, the fangs of the lions! Let them vanish like water that flows away; when they draw the bow, let their arrows be blunted. Like a slug melting away as it moves along, like a stillborn child, may they not see the sun. Before your pots can feel the heat of the thorns—whether they be green or dry—the wicked will be swept away. The righteous will be glad when they are avenged, when they bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.

Psalm 58:6-10

For the sins of their mouths, for the words of their lips, let them be caught in their pride. For the curses and lies they utter, consume them in wrath, consume them till they are no more. Then it will be known to the ends of the earth that God rules over Jacob.

Psalm 59:12-13

Pour out your wrath on them; let your fierce anger overtake them. May their place be deserted; let there be no one to dwell in their tents. For they persecute those you wound and talk about the pain of those you hurt. Charge them with crime upon crime; do not let them share in your salvation. May they be blotted out of the book of life and not be listed with the righteous.

Psalm 69:24-28

1

Those Puzzling Prayers from the Psalms

HAVE YOU EVER BEEN PUZZLED BY THE PSALMS? Many of these beautiful Hebrew poems are obviously prayers, and it doesn't seem natural to most of us merely to read them as if we were listening in on someone else's conversation with God. In times of joy or deep sorrow and confusion, don't you frequently enter into the spirit of the Psalms and pray them as your own? But then, with your heart fully engaged in prayer, you come upon those phrases that seem so shocking—so diametrically opposed—to all you've been taught in Christian love and forbearance.

How are you to understand a prayer from Scripture that says, "Break the teeth in their mouths, O God" (Ps. 58:6) or "Let death take my enemies by surprise; let them go down alive to the grave" (Ps. 55:15)? That's strong language!

Have you wondered whether the psalmists' prayers, "May all my enemies . . . be ashamed and dismayed. . . . May they perish in disgrace" (Pss. 6:10; 83:17) are an expression of sinful revenge, as some writers say? Are they guilty of expressing worldly sentiments of revenge as in a newspaper classified ad I saw recently?

Jilted? Stood up? Divorced? Fired? Whatever your meaningless memory, now you can wilt 'em away with a wilted bouquet! Just call Wilted Flowers, your therapeutic floral consultants, and put a little happiness in your hurt.

Do you think the psalmists are indulging such spiteful feelings?

Too many sincere Christians rush past such expressions as if shielding their faces from the heat of hatred, quickly moving on to other sections where they find more comfortable language. (There are so many *soothing* phrases in the Psalms!) But can that be a proper response to any part of God's Word? Or is it merely a cop-out?

The problem is bigger than many realize! The more carefully we look at the Psalms, the more we see that the prayers for vengeance are not a handful of side comments. They are not found in just a few isolated places so that we can overlook them and decide that it may not be worth our time to try to understand them. They pervade the book! Then we begin to recognize that other portions of the Old Testament express similar ideas. We even find them restated by our Lord and His apostles in the *New Testament!*

Have you who accept the Scripture as the only rule of faith and practice grappled with these issues? Have you who are called to handle correctly the Word of Truth sought to apprehend the truths taught here so as to be able to break this bread for God's people?

Serious Bible students have puzzled over these problems for centuries, so if you find yourself mystified, don't be surprised. Some people have found it so difficult to understand these perplexing prayers that they have concluded that these segments were *mistakenly included* in the Word of God. But our doctrine of inspiration must lead us to expand our knowledge of God and His ways as we seek solutions to these deep questions. There *are* answers, and it is *our* business as followers of the

Most High God to apply ourselves to understanding His Word so that we will *find* them. What an exciting assignment is now set before us!

The Uniqueness of the Psalms

The book of Psalms is unique among the sixty-six books of the Bible in that it is a prayer book given to us by God. Later we'll discuss in more depth our need for this prayer book from God and how we are to use it in our Christian lives and preaching. For now, let's recognize that giants of the church through the ages have found deep mines of truth here and that the hearts of New Testament believers today beat a responding "Amen" to its expressions of comfort, contrition, and praise.

John Calvin, the great theologian of the Reformation, wrote a very extensive commentary on this prayer book of the Bible. In the preface to his classic volumes on the Psalms, the Reformer speaks of the heavenly doctrine in these prayers and stresses their importance for entering into "genuine and earnest prayer." His own experience of drawing near to God through these prayers is evident as he says,

In short, as calling upon God is one of the principal means of securing safety, and as a better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise cannot be found elsewhere than in the Psalms, it follows, that in proportion to the proficiency which a man shall have attained in understanding them, will be his knowledge of the most important part of celestial doctrine.¹

These God-given prayers become, in effect, the pathway on which God leads us upward to himself.

Our Lord Jesus Christ and his apostles used the Psalms constantly in teaching men to know God. The New Testament

directly quotes the Old Testament approximately 283 times. An astounding 41 percent (116 of the 283) of all these Old Testament quotations are from the Psalms. According to the gospel records, Christ himself alluded to the Psalms over 50 times. To know God truly and to be equipped to lead others to a knowledge of Him, we must read, learn, and inwardly digest these prayers.

My own experience with these prayers has brought me many times to sense God's very presence. As my understanding of them deepened through much study, comparing Scripture with Scripture, my prayer life has begun to enter into the very prayers of Jesus Christ. I've also been enabled to preach these psalms with great joy. It is my earnest desire to help you to learn how to rejoice in praying and preaching the Psalms of the Prince of Peace.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- 1 In what ways are the Psalms unique?
- 2 What is the attitude of Christ and the New Testament writers toward the Psalms?
- 3 What comments and reactions have you heard others express with regard to the imprecatory psalms?
- 4 Begin to think how you may answer those who question the cries of vengeance found in the Psalms.

Perhaps there is no part of the Bible that gives more perplexity and pain to its readers than this; perhaps nothing that constitutes a more plausible objection to the belief that the psalms are the productions of inspired men than the spirit of revenge which they sometimes seem to breathe and the spirit of cherished malice and implacableness which the writers seem to manifest.

Albert Barnes
Notes, Critical, Explanatory
and Practical, on the Book of Psalms

To some minds, these imprecatory psalms and passages are perhaps a more difficult obstacle than any other in the way of a settled confidence in the Divine inspiration of the Scriptures.

J. Sidlow Baxter
Explore the Book

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Paul the apostle
2 Timothy 3:16-17

TWENTY-FIFTH ANNIVERSARY REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

ALTHOUGH THE PSALMS ARE MUCH BELOVED by readers of the Bible, hostile language in individual psalms is often rejected or misunderstood by well-meaning Christians. Pastor-theologian James E. Adams tackles such questions as:

- Are these psalms from God?
- Who is the speaker in the psalms?
- Who are the enemies the psalms describe?
- May we pray these psalms today?
- How ought a pastor to preach these texts?

“James Adams’s book on the rather startling imprecatory psalms is the best of its kind. . . . Christ-centered throughout, it is enlightening, succinct, warm, practical, and helpful for everyone grappling with the strong language of these psalms—including pastors! Once you’ve read this book, you will no longer feel confused or embarrassed by these psalms, nor will you want to avoid them. . . . Let Dr. Adams’s book assist you to preach, teach, and pray the ‘war psalms’ as never before!”

JOEL R. BEEKE, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Dr. James Adams’ *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* must rank among the finest studies on the imprecatory psalms. . . . I routinely advise others to read this book when any question about those psalms arises. . . . We would all do well to spend time in this book, with these psalms, and in prayer for God to triumph over the forces of evil we face today.”

MICHAEL A. MILTON, Chair for Missions and Evangelism,
Erskine Theological Seminary

JAMES E. ADAMS (DMin, Westminster Seminary California) has been the pastor of Cornerstone Church in Mesa, Arizona, for more than thirty-five years and has taught theology for Reformed Baptist Seminary and in Latin America.


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