

# Oh, The Imprecations

Psalm 35:1

*Of David.*

Contend, **O LORD**, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me!

<sup>2</sup> Take hold of shield and buckler and rise for my help!

<sup>3</sup> Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers! Say to my soul, "I am your salvation!"

<sup>4</sup> Let them be put to shame and dishonor who seek after my life! Let them be turned back and disappointed who devise evil against me!

<sup>5</sup> Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them away!

<sup>6</sup> Let their way be dark and slippery, with **the angel of the LORD** pursuing them!

<sup>7</sup> For without cause they hid their net for me; without cause they dug a pit for my life.

<sup>8</sup> Let destruction come upon him when he does not know it! And let the net that he hid ensnare him; let him fall into it-- to his destruction!

<sup>9</sup> Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD, exulting in his salvation.

<sup>10</sup> All my bones shall say, "**O LORD, who is like you**, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, the poor and needy from him who robs him?"

<sup>11</sup> Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know.

<sup>12</sup> They repay me evil for good; my soul is bereft.

<sup>13</sup> But I, when they were sick-- I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting; I prayed with head bowed on my chest.

<sup>14</sup> I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother; as one who laments his mother, I bowed down in mourning.

<sup>15</sup> **But** at my stumbling they rejoiced and gathered; they gathered together against me; **wretches whom I did not know** tore at me without ceasing;

<sup>16</sup> like profane mockers at a feast, they gnash at me with their teeth.

<sup>17</sup> How long, **O Lord**, will you look on? Rescue me from their destruction, my precious life from the lions!

<sup>18</sup> I will thank you in the great congregation; in the mighty throng I will praise you.

<sup>19</sup> Let not those rejoice over me who are wrongfully my foes, and let not those wink the eye who hate me without cause.

<sup>20</sup> For they do not speak peace, but against those who are quiet in the land they devise words of deceit.

<sup>21</sup> They open wide their mouths against me; they say, "Aha, Aha! Our eyes have seen it!"

<sup>22</sup> You have seen, **O LORD**; be not silent! **O Lord**, be not far from me!

<sup>23</sup> Awake and rouse yourself for my vindication, for my cause, my God and my Lord!

<sup>24</sup> Vindicate me, **O LORD**, my God, according to your righteousness, and let them not rejoice over me!

<sup>25</sup> Let them not say in their hearts, "Aha, our heart's desire!" Let them not say, "We have swallowed him up."

<sup>26</sup> Let them be put to shame and disappointed altogether who rejoice at my calamity! Let them be clothed with shame and dishonor who magnify themselves against me!

<sup>27</sup> Let those who delight in my righteousness shout for joy and be glad and say evermore, "Great is the LORD, who delights in the welfare of his servant!"

<sup>28</sup> Then my tongue shall tell of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long."<sup>1</sup>

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Psalm 35

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<sup>1</sup> Red = Prayer                      Blue = Imprecation                      Purple = Formal Complaint  
\_\_\_\_\_ = Psalmist's Innocence    Green = Confidence                      Pink = Praise  
bold = Invoking God

## Swimming in Hate

SHE WAS A BLUE-EYED, CHUBBY CHEEKED five-year-old when she joined her family on the picket line for the first time. Her mom made her leave her dolls in the minivan. She would stand on a street corner in the heavy Kansas humidity, surrounded by a few *dozen* relatives. She carried tiny inflammatory signs that she couldn't yet read. This was the beginning.

Their protests soon became a daily occurrence and an international phenomenon. In her home, life was framed as an epic spiritual battle between good and evil. The good was my church and its members. The bad was everyone else (this is all in her words). From baseball games to military funerals, from protesting human tragedy to sexual lifestyle choices (which she never tells us if she now thinks are right or wrong), they had to distinguish between themselves and the world. It was the focus of their whole lives. Through all of this, her and her ten siblings became a poster children to the world for religious brainwashing by right-wing religious kooks.

Her name is **Megan Phelps-Roper**, one of many granddaughters of the infamous and now late pastor Fred Phelps of **Westboro Baptist Church**.<sup>2</sup> Five years ago, Megan left her church and recently came out with her story as to why. Much of it is good. Some of it is unknown—did she leave the faith or just some of the teachings of that church? But something she said in her story made me think of our Psalm today.

She had a worldview crisis after interacting with people outside her family-church on Twitter. While she initially got the responses of intolerance and hatred she expected, others started getting to know her and listening to her; she listened back. Through a series of questions, the foundation of her belief system started crumbling. The one that I immediately thought of for Psalm 35 is, “**How could we claim to love our neighbor while at the same time praying for God to destroy them?**”

This question gets at the heart, not only of the activities of Westboro Baptist Church, but at so-called **Imprecatory Psalms**. In a *Thesis* to the faculty of Biblical Theological

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<sup>2</sup> **Megan Phelps-Roper**, “I Grew Up in the Westboro Baptist Church. Here’s Why I Left,” *Ted* (March 2017).  
[https://www.ted.com/talks/megan\\_phelps\\_ropers\\_i\\_grew\\_up\\_in\\_the\\_westboro\\_baptist\\_church\\_here\\_s\\_why\\_i\\_left/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/megan_phelps_ropers_i_grew_up_in_the_westboro_baptist_church_here_s_why_i_left/transcript?language=en)

Seminary on Psalm 35, **Frederic Putnam** asks a very similar question as Megan's friends, "How can the psalmist curse his enemies and still claim to be righteous?"<sup>3</sup> This kind of question clearly bothered Megan, as it should bother all who call Jesus Christ Lord. Is there a good answer that allows us to maintain both?

## Imprecatory Psalms and Psalm 35

**What is an Imprecatory Psalm?** They are songs that contain curses (imprecations, maledictions) against enemies. It is never absolutely every verse in a song, but parts within the whole, which is why Imprecatory Psalms are almost always categorized under a larger heading like "Complaint" or "Lament" Psalms.<sup>4</sup> I reviewed seven different lists of imprecatory psalms (see chart below). Only one psalm made it into every list. This was Psalm 137, probably because the most difficult of all imprecations appears in that song. As the Targum puts it, "Happy he who takes and smashes your

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<sup>3</sup> **Frederic Clarke Putnam**, "Imprecation and Righteousness in Psalm 35," A Thesis to the faculty of Biblical Theological Seminary (May, 1980), 1. [https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted\\_hildebrandt/otesources/19-psalms/text/books/putnam-psalm35/putnam-psalm35.pdf](https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/otesources/19-psalms/text/books/putnam-psalm35/putnam-psalm35.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> For example, Logos' *Psalms Explorer* feature has 15 Imprecatory Psalms, but it has 59 Lament songs which all of the Imprecatory songs fall into. See list G in the chart below.

children on a rock” (Ps 137:9). This is a perfectly fine translation of one of the most difficult verses in the Bible. And why does this all matter? Because it is verses like this that have caused not a few to so distance themselves from the OT that they come to think of its deity as a completely different God from Jesus in the NT. This is therefore very serious business, because that conclusion destroys Christianity.

“Imprecatory Psalms” lists consist of between five and twenty of the 150 Psalms in the Psalter, and the lists do not always overlap. According to James Adams, there are thirty-six Psalms that contain these kinds of verses.<sup>5</sup> Putnam has fifty-two,<sup>6</sup> or more than one-third of all the Psalms! Though we haven’t looked in much detail at this yet, we’ve already studied nine (see Adams) psalms that fit this in our study up to Psalm 35. The point is, this isn’t a minor theme. Therefore, because of the seriousness of the theological question and the sheer volume of these verses, we need to learn to think properly about what is going on.

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<sup>5</sup> James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1991), 116.

<sup>6</sup> Putnam, 6. He cites several works I could not access. He also cites Psalms 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 83, 109, and 137 as the eight most listed Imprecatory Psalms.

## Seven Imprecatory Psalms Lists

Psalm	List A	List B	List C	List D	List E	List F	List G	
	<i>Tyndale Bible Dictionary 2001</i>	Baker Ency. of the Bible 1988	Holman Illust. Bible Dict. 2003	Oxford Dict. Christ. Ch. 2005	Johannes Vos, WTJ 4.2 (1942)	Bible Gateway (online)	Logos' Psalms Explorer	
5	5	5	5			5	5	
6							6	
10						10		
11			11					
12							12	
17	17	17	17			17		
28	28	28						
35	35	35	35			35	35	
40	40	40						
52							52	
54							54	
55	55	55	55		55			
56							56	
58				58		58	58	
59	59	59	59		59	59		
68				68				
69			69	69	69	69	69	
70	70	70				70		
71	71	71						
74	74							
79	79	79			79	79	79	
80	80	80						
83						83	83	
94	94	94						
109	109		109	109	109	109	109	
129	129	129				129		
137	137	137	137	137	137	137	137	
139	139	139					139	
140	140	140	140			140		
143							143	
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>15</b>

Psalm 35 may be the best place to do this. Why? **The short answer** is that Psalm 35 helps us understand at least as well as any place in the Bible, how we can answer those two existential questions properly. **How could we claim to love our neighbor while at the same time praying for God to**

destroy them?” and “How can the psalmist curse his enemies and still claim to be righteous?” Why?

The long answer is that Psalm 35 is an elaborately developed lament song which includes invoking the LORD, an elaborately developed legal complaint, prayers, confidence, praise, and vows. Do you hear how many other things are here besides calling down curses? All of these frame the context of the imprecations. But especially important is how throughout the song, the Psalmist (Psalm 35 begins simply: “Of David”) protests his own innocence. This takes us into the heart of a proper answer to the difficult questions we have posed.

## Psalm 35 as a Prayer

We are going to go thematically through Psalm 35 so that we can understand better when is happening as these various subjects interact with one another. The overarching theme is prayer. In one way or another, everything we will say specifically about calling on God, complaining, justifying, or praising has prayer as its proper context. Each

is proper to prayer and to praying. Every single verse is part of a single prayer that makes up Psalm 35.

Jim Adams does in a whole chapter in his book *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*, “**May We Pray Imprecatory Psalms?**” While some of this song is certainly a no brainer here, other parts cause us to ask the question. It stands behind the more obvious question of loving neighbor while praying for God to destroy them. It is one thing for David to do it. But can or should you and I? What would be the implications of doing so? To answer the **implications**, we first have to look at the **imprecations**.

## Psalm 35 and Its Imprecations

The song contains **several very specific imprecations**. These include fearful things such as **opposition to the angel of the LORD**, **destruction**, **shame**, **humiliation**, and **dishonor**. Looking at the song we find each of these and more. Looking in order, he prays for God to “**contend**” against them (**Ps 53:1**). He is asking God to **strive against** them (YLT), to **oppose** them (TNK), to **fight** them (NET). The second half of the verse intensifies it. “**Fight**” against

them. It can be translated as “make war against them” (PsTarg) or “give battle to my foes” (TNK) or “attack” them (NET). This is a brutal way to start a song!

Vv. 2-3 show the warfare imagery more clearly. First, he prays to the LORD to take up His shield and buckler (2). The shield is a small shield for cavalry; the buckler is a large shield for infantry. They are defensive weapons. God needs to defend him. Then he asks him to take up the offensive weapons of spear and javelin (3). What do you do with spears and javelins? You impale a person on them. Yikes!

Vv. 4-6 then give us a series of imprecations. Vs. 4 has four of them: shame, dishonor, turn back, and disappoint them. Other words are disgrace them, confuse, repulse, frustrate, confound, embarrass, humiliate, overcome them, turn them back in dismay. This is the Psalmist calling judgment down upon his enemies.

Vs. 5-6 are two of the three instances of the Angel of the LORD in the Psalter (the other being the previous Psalm 34:7). This brings a sense of connection to the two songs. As with the last occurrence, so also with these—many scholars think this simply refers to a created angel of some kind that God sends to carry out judgment. But consider

how so many rightly connected the Angel in the previous psalm to the Captain of the Armies of the LORD in Joshua 5. It says, “When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man was standing before him with his drawn sword in his hand. And Joshua went to him and said to him, ‘Are you for us, or for our adversaries?’ And he said, ‘No; but I am the commander of the army of the LORD. Now I have come.’ And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped and said to him, ‘What does my lord say to his servant?’ And the commander of the LORD’s army said to Joshua, ‘Take off your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy’” (Josh 5:13-15).

A frightening scene to be sure. But who was this person? He is the same one who said to Moses at the burning bush, “Do not come near; take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). The verbal connection is deliberate. By whom? “The Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush” (2). He identified himself as I AM WHO I AM (14), Yahweh, the God of your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (15).

This Angel would later fight for Israel in the Exodus. “Then the angel of God who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel” (Ex 14:19-20). Then after Moses stretched out his arm, parted the sea, the people crossed over, but the hosts of Egypt were drown, Moses sang this song, “The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name” (Ex 15:3). Isaiah later saw him coming from Edom, “in crimsoned garments from Bozrah ... splendid in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength” (Isa 63:1). “Why is your apparel red, and your garments like his who treads in the winepress,” Isaiah asked him (2)? “I trod [the peoples] in my anger and trampled them in my wrath; their lifeblood spattered on my garments, and stained all my apparel. For the day of vengeance was in my heart, and my year of redemption had come” (3-4). An absolutely terrifying sight. But the same Angel (9) as in older days. This is who David now pleads will make his enemies like chaff before the wind and drive them away (Ps 35:5), whom he asks to make their way dark and slippery by pursuing them wherever they go (6). Are you

getting a sense of the horror of the imprecations? But are you also noticing whom he is calling to carry out the vengeance? A created being? God forbid! We'll say more about this later.

He isn't finished. "Let destruction come upon him when he does not know it! And let the net that he hid ... ensnare him; let him fall into it—to his destruction (8). Things settle down for a bit when he prays, "Let not those rejoice over me ... let not those wink the eye who hate me" (19) ... let them not rejoice (24) ... Let them not say in their hearts, 'Aha, our heart's desire!' Let them not say, 'We have swallowed him up'" (25). But then it returns to the beginning when he says, "Let them be put to shame and disappointed ... Let them be clothed with shame and dishonor" (26).

As you can hear, all of these are prayers for God to punish his enemies, to do bad things to them, some worse than others. These are but examples of the many kinds of imprecations that we find throughout the Psalms which come to a climax as we saw in Psalm 137. These are the kinds of things I've very rarely heard anyone pray in my company. I rarely pray them myself. I think it is because we really

don't know what to do with them or how to think properly about them. We know David prayed them, but how can this have meaning to us today? These are some of **the implications** of the imprecations I want us to now begin to explore.

## Imprecations and the Court

The first thing I want to do is ask a couple of questions. Do the imprecations—the curses in the psalms—find themselves in a category all by themselves in Scripture without being related to anything else? In other words, do they come out of the clear blue sky, or is the Psalmist thinking about other things in relation to them? If so, what is he thinking about?

A clue comes in the first word of our Psalm (in English that is), which we already said is one of those imprecations: “**Contend.**” This word is **a court-room term**, found often in that very setting in earlier places of the Bible. “**You shall not fall in with the many to do evil, nor shall you bear witness in a lawsuit (*rib*), siding with the many, so as to pervert justice, nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his lawsuit**

(*rib*)” (Ex 23:2-3). The YLT uses the word “strife” rather than “lawsuit.”<sup>7</sup> The point? The Psalmist is summoning the LORD to be David’s judge and vindicator in court. But if you are going to do this in a court, it means there is a case to be made. What is that case? It deals first with his enemies and second with himself.

## Imprecations and The Wicked

Regarding his enemies, his case shows a vital point regarding imprecations. These people are not acting neutrally, much less morally. They are wicked and evil. They are disobeying God’s law. They are harming people unjustly. In these curses, David is viewing people as sinners, not as humans. So what have they done? Let’s consider the evidence.

First, they contend and fight against the psalmist (Ps 35:1). Second, they have been pursuing him (3). Third, they are seeking his to take his life (4), not just to kill him, but to murder him. Fourth, they devise evil against him (4). Fifth, they did this in secret as traps. He says they “hid their net for

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<sup>7</sup> As a noun: cf. Ex 23:2, 3, 6; 2Sa 15:2, 4; Hos 4:1; Mic 6:2, 4. As a verb: cf. Isa 3:13; 57:16; Ps 103:9; Am 7:4.

me” and “dug a pit for my life” (7). These things are done ahead of time, before the person comes into view, while they are away off doing other things. **Sixth**, they brought malicious witnesses against him (11). A witness is another court-term, and this time they are putting the psalmist on trial. But they are doing it by bringing witnesses who seek to harm him rather than tell the truth. **Seventh**, they repay him with evil (12). “Evil” is a moral word, and as we can see so far in this list, all of these things are immoral actions. They are breaking God’s moral law.

**Eighth**, they rejoiced when he stumbled (15). They mocked him and taunted him and teased him and ridiculed him and scorned him. **Ninth**, they gathered together against him (15). This wasn’t just one person, it was a group. Many people did this by conspiring together. **Tenth**, even people he did not tore into him without ceasing (15). This means that the leaders of the coup managed to get the crowds on their side. **Eleventh**, they gnashed their teeth at him. The image is of a deliberate biting hard of the teeth in anger. **Twelfth**, they hated him (19). **Thirteenth**, they refused to speak peace (20). That means, they were speaking openly of hostility and war. **Fourteenth**, they did this against the quiet

of the land whom they spoke deceitfully to (20). **Fifteenth**, they open wide their mouths with lies saying, “**Aha, Aha! Our eyes have seen it**” (21)? And what did they “see?” Whatever they wanted to make up. But they did this in public. **Sixteenth**, they rejoice at his calamity (26). Sounds a bit like the folks at Westboro Baptist Church. And **finally**, they magnified themselves against him. They glorified themselves at his expense. They became great in the eyes of people; he became despised by all. That’s quite a case he has made. It shows beyond a shadow of a doubt the wickedness of those he is now praying for God to curse.

## **Imprecations and The Psalmists’ Own Behavior**

The flip side of this is **his own behavior**. In my estimation, as they struggle with imprecatory psalms, this is **the single most important thing** that people miss. Remember our question? *How can we claim to love our neighbor while at the same time praying for God to destroy them?* This question hits the heart of the matter. But the fact of the matter is, it *is* possible; though, I would suggest that many among the few who actually think imprecatory psalms are

for today never once consider their own behavior in this regard.

So what does the psalmist tell us about himself? He makes several claims before the Court of Heaven in this regard. **First**, “**without cause**” they hid their net for me (7). Similarly, “**without cause**” they dug a pit for my life (7). And again, “**without cause**” they hate me (19). What they did in the first two seems to suggest, as Solomon would say, there could be a time for everything under heaven—even hiding nets and digging pits for people. But now was not the time. The time would be if there is cause. That cause would have to be in the face of great evil that would deserve such traps so that they might be caught and stop it. The psalmist dares to tell God that what they have done is without cause. **He is innocent** of anything deserving such traps against him. They are “**wrongfully my foes**” (19).

**Second**, they try to trap him with words in their own courts, asking him things *he knows nothing about* (11). Now, there are hearings where people *claim* they don't know a thing, like **President Clinton** not being able to remember what he did with Monica Lewinski. A pure lie. This isn't David. Or when **President Reagan** kept repeating in the Iran

Contra hearings that he didn't recall being told about sales from Iranian weapons being diverted to Nicaraguan contras. Turns out, Reagan literally had Alzheimer's disease. He literally didn't remember. That isn't David either. David's enemies are trying to trap him in things he never did by talking about things he knows nothing about using witnesses who were rising up to testify against him that he did. This is pure evil against one who is innocent.

He calls it (**third**) repaying me evil “**for good**” (**12**). **This one is very important.** They repaid him evil for what? *For good*. In other words, David was not neutral towards them. He certainly wasn't evil towards them. He was doing good to them. This is exactly what the Law of God told him to do. “**You shall do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD**” (**Deut 6:18**). And what is good? To not take vengeance or bear a grudge, but to love your neighbor as yourself (**Lev 19:18**). To do justly and to love mercy (**Micah 6:8**). To care for orphans and widows, the alien and the strangers in your midst (**Lev 19:34; Isa 1:17; James 1:28**). To do to others as you would also want them to do to you (**Matt 7:12**).

This is exactly what he did for them, as he considered them **friends** and **brothers**. Thus **fourth**—in what turns out to be the very center of the poem, “When they were sick—I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting; I prayed with head bowed on my chest” (13). “I went about as though I grieved for my friend or my brother; as one who laments his mother, I bowed down in mourning” (Ps 35:14). The **summary** of all this is found in vs. 27’s “**in my righteousness.**” “Let those who delight in my righteousness shout for joy and be glad and say evermore, ‘Great is the LORD, who delights in the welfare of his servant.’”<sup>8</sup>

When people treat you this way after you have treated them that way, what does it do to your soul? “**My soul is bereft**” (12). This is a word that depicts great **mourning and**

<sup>8</sup> Seeing it as a chiasm ([http://www.bible.literarystructure.info/bible/19\\_Psalms\\_pericope\\_e.html](http://www.bible.literarystructure.info/bible/19_Psalms_pericope_e.html))

P(35:1a)	35:1 Of David. (35:1)
A(35:1b-6)	35:1 Oppose (vb: <i>rib</i> ), LORD, those who oppose (vb: <i>rib</i> ) me; war upon those who make war upon me.
B(35:7-8)	Evils of Enemies
C(35:9-10)	35:9 Who rescue the afflicted from the powerful, the afflicted and needy from the despoiler
D(35:11-12)	Evils of Enemies
<b>E(35:13-14)</b>	<b>Beneficence</b>
D'(35:15-16)	Evils of Enemies
C'(35:17-19)	35:17 Save me from roaring beasts
B'(35:20-21)	Evils of Enemies
A'(35:22-28)	35:23 Awake, be vigilant in my defense, in my cause (noun: <i>rib</i> ), my God and my Lord.

suffering of soul. It is a profound grieving of spirit. And why not? For what these people have done is nothing short of treason against their loving king.

How might this fit with Megan's claim that in her home, life was framed as an epic spiritual battle between her good church and family and everyone else who are automatically evil? At first glance, it might seem to be the same thing. David is claiming innocence, and they are claiming to be good. But this is only a mirage.

The reality is, these people do not do *any* good in terms of the law of God towards the people they protest. In fact, their actions are often the epitome of evil. Alluding to **Psalm 35:13**, **Romans 12:15** says, “**Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.**” Rather than obeying the Apostle, these people literally revel in others hurt. They rally because others die. They ridicule others in their sin. They relish the taunts and the picketing, and rely on the media coverage to help boost their self-congratulatory egos as they justify like psychopaths how good their evil behavior really is. They don't pray for their enemies except that they be damned to hell. They show no sense of their own continued need for a Savior because they are also sinners.

This is a sick, twisted, and perverted understanding of the Bible, of God's sovereignty, and of his loving, good nature. Megan was right to leave.

In a word, these people are **hypocrites**. But is David a **hypocrite? No**. For look at how he did good to those seeking to do him harm. And then look at his humility. “**Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD, exulting in his salvation. All my bones shall say, ‘O LORD, who is like you, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, the poor and needy from him who robs him’**” (**Ps 35:9-10**). The king of Israel calling *himself* **poor and needy**. This is the one Jesus says in the Beatitudes (following the Psalms) is Blessed/Happy in God. And we know from many other places, that this person confessed his sins often, knowing that he is not a perfect man.

And yet, in this Psalm, the psalmist does not confess sin. And that leads to the final point I want to make about the actions of the psalmist in Psalm 35. For while David is speaking, and relatively speaking he is innocent of wrongdoing regarding these people, **there is One who sings this song who is innocent of all wrong doing** towards everyone, even though in very many ways, the things done

against the psalmist here were done against Him, and the things said of the Psalmist here were done by him.

The NT tells us that, “The chief priests and the whole council were seeking false testimony against Jesus that they might put him to death, but they found none, though many false witnesses came forward. At last two came forward” (Matt 26:59-60). That’s what the Psalmist said they did to him (Ps 35:11). The NT said, “And they will mock him” and even worse things (Mark 10:34). That’s what the Psalmist said they did to him (16). Summing it up, John tells us of an exchange between Jesus and his disciples as he prepares them for what will be coming for them in the future:

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you ... If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you ... Whoever hates me hates my Father also. If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that

is written in their Law must be fulfilled: ‘*They hated me without a cause.*’”

(John 15:18-25)

Jesus quotes **Psalm 35:19**. In other words, he is the “me” of the Psalm. He is Psalmist. Therefore, we see not only the things done against him, but also the things he did to others as the backdrop to understanding the imprecations of the all the psalms.

## Imprecations and The Law of Moses

Next, I want to move to **back to the idea of the courtroom**. If the psalmist (be it David or Christ) is bringing charges against the enemies, then two things need to be kept in mind. The first is **what does the law say is supposed to happen** if the law is broken so violently, so deliberately, so pathologically. The second is, **who is to carry out the retribution?**

As to the first question, we need to think about the so called *lex talionis*. This is the OT law of retribution otherwise known as “**an eye for an eye.**” It is summed up in **Exodus 21:23-25**, “**But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for**

foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” The law demands justice. Justice is equal payment for the crime deserved. Not lesser payment, getting off with a slap on the wrist, as often happens to the rich. Not greater payment, forcing upon someone excessive punishment greater than the crime deserves as so often happens to the poor or minority (or, vice-versa in a world where everything is reversed because of angry people refusing to forgive who impose things like political correctness upon a culture as an act of retribution).

The first verse of the psalm calls our attention to the fact that the imprecations are in accordance with this law. “Contend, O LORD, with those who contend with me; fight against those who fight against me” (Ps 35:1). Do you hear it? Eye for eye. Contend for contend. Fight for fight. They go after my life; go after their life. They pursue me; pursue them. They spring a trap for me; spring a trap for them. They do it without cause; do it because of your laws. It is vital to keep this in mind whenever you hear someone praying in the Bible things like curses upon their enemies. Consider the curse only after you have considered the cause.

You will come to see that the psalmists are never asking God to do more than what justice deserves.

## Imprecations: Who is Carrying Out Vengeance?

Of equal importance is **the source of the vengeance** in the songs. David never once says he will or asks God to let him be the cause of retribution. Not a single time. What is amazing here is that according to the law, vengeance is often carried out for God by proxy through the state. We see this in the OT (**1Kgs 10:9**) and the NT (**Rom 13:4**). As king, David could have asked God for this. Legally speaking, he may not even have needed to. The right was already his. But he knew his own heart, and he knew that he couldn't carry out justice without sinning. No way.

Therefore, he does exactly as he should do. He prays for God to do it. “**You shall not take vengeance**” (**Lev 19:18**). “**Vengeance is mine**” says the LORD (**Deut 32:35**; **Rom 12:19**). **Why put this into the hands of God** (yes, even the hands of God the Father through the Spirit by the Son post-incarnation)? Because God will execute justice *justly*. He will always do exactly what is right, and he will do so not only

taking into consideration justice, but also mercy, election, love, gentleness, swiftness, wrath, anger, longsuffering, and all the other things God and God alone can do perfectly and simultaneously. He can't help it because this is his very nature as a simple being.<sup>9</sup>

That means, whatever he does is right and good—by definition. If you were to carry such things out, there isn't a chance in a billion you would succeed. Therefore, you hand it over to the LORD, knowing and trusting, as Abraham did when he talked face to face with the Angel of the LORD, that **the God of the earth will do what is right (Gen 18:25)**, and in that context, he was asking the LORD to be merciful, not vengeful.

Amazingly, the NT takes our Psalm and applies it to the Lord hardening Israel. **“And David says, ‘Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they**

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<sup>9</sup> **Going Deeper:** We confess the doctrine of divine simplicity in **LBC 2.1** in the words, **“infinite in being and perfection”** then followed by a list of attributes. Simplicity simply means that God is not composed of parts. There are disagreements over how this works. But all agree that because he is “simple” (uncomposed), all his attributes are taken into consideration *maximally, simultaneously, and always* (at every point in time), no matter what the situation. We are not like this. When we get angry, for instance, it is very easy for us not to consider having mercy or compassion. When we like someone very much, we may show partiality when they do something bad that we might not show to someone we don't like as much. And so on. God does not do this. Ever. Because he is simple. And this is one of many reasons why we can and must trust his verdicts in this world.

cannot see, and bend their backs forever” (Rom 11:9-10; cf. Ps 35:8). God did exactly what David asked him to do in the days of Jesus because of how they treated their Messiah. And it isn’t just to Jews. In Thessalonians it says, “While people are saying, ‘There is peace and security,’ then sudden destruction will come upon them as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape” (1Th 5:3; cf. Ps 35:8). This refers to the future and the coming of the Son of Man. Therefore, God hears even as he has heard this very psalm being prayed in the past.

## Psalm 35 and Our Relation to Prayers of Imprecation

How then shall we respond to such things as this? **Westboro Baptist** calls down many imprecations upon their enemies, even as many are doing right this moment to a new President of the United States. This hate is spreading across our nation like gangrene. Strangely, those enemies never did a thing to them personally. Sadly, they don’t respond according to the law of love to their enemies personally either. They act as if they are the Judge *and* Executioner for God and they revel in other people’s damnation like pigs in

mud and return to it again and again like dogs to vomit. Yes, Westboro is among the few who take biblical imprecations seriously today (those attacking the President show that they also take imprecations seriously, they just don't want to admit that we should do it, and often hate the Bible for doing it), but in failing so badly at the rest of the Psalm, they utterly abuse the curses as well, and they make a mockery of God, His Word, and his Law. What they spread is not Christianity, from either Testament. It is a cultic brand of self-righteous hatred in the name of my God. And it makes me angry.

I don't know about [Megan](#). The verdict is out. She left the church and the angry silence and forsaking of her entire family in the process. All because she realized for the first time that *the behavior of her family* is in great conflict with the teachings of Jesus (and I should also point out, the OT). Will she throw the whole law out the window in a knee-jerk reaction to be more "kind" and "tolerant" as pretty much our whole culture claims to have done (but which we are seeing in our day is just an excuse to change one form of intolerance for another, one brand of meanness for another)?

How will she see the imprecatory psalms now that she is beyond the power of her families influence?

We should pray for her. And her kin. And our culture. As we heed the words of the Psalm. All of them.

Someone has written, “The imprecation of a calamity upon another would seem to be wholly adverse to the spirit of the New Testament.”<sup>10</sup> But this is to have never read the New Testament. Jesus says, “On that day ... I [will] declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness’” (Matt 7:23). This is very similar to Psalm 35:5 and the chaff before the wind, or vs. 3’s “turn them back.” You might say, “But that is Jesus.” True enough, but he is talking about God carrying out vengeance (for he is God), just like the psalm does.

But it isn’t just Jesus. Paul prays like this often. “If anyone does not love the Lord, let him be accursed. Come, O Lord!” (1Co 16:22). Or, “I have confidence in the Lord that you will take no other view, and the one who is troubling you will bear the penalty, whoever he is ... I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!” (Gal 5:10-12). We could multiply these over and over again,

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<sup>10</sup> B.B. Edwards, “The Imprecations in the Scriptures,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 1 (February 1844): 99 [97-110].

especially when it comes to heretics that infiltrate the churches.

It is not evil to call down curses upon your enemy either: Assuming you really have one; *and* assuming they have actually done these kinds of horrible things to you; *and* assuming you are praying for God to do it rather than you; *and* assuming that you have not and will not act the same in return, because you love God's law, and you love your enemies as if they were your own family. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

And notice, **there is no personal retribution in these prayers**. Personal revenge is out. But beloved, personal revenge has *always* been out! It is not wrong to pray for God to carry out justice. In fact, it is good, for justice is good. What's more, many who say you should never pray like this end up cursing their brothers in this world on a regular basis anyway. So why not learn how to do it biblically rather than satanically?

As we conclude, admitting it can be ok to pray these psalms today, **Jim Adams** teaches<sup>11</sup> that you should **pray in Christ and not in your own anger and need for revenge**.

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<sup>11</sup> See Adams, 51-64. <https://www.the-highway.com/articleJune00.html>. Also Putnam, 86-89.

Praying in Christ means not just in his name, but according to how he has revealed the Father to us in his person while here on the earth. Prayerfully surrender *your right and need* for vengeance. Right now, this is the exact opposite way most are behaving regarding politics and religion and many other things. How much more does this carry over into our personal lives?

**Pray that you may forgive your enemies.** Pray that he would remove your anger and fill it with compassion for them. God knows we are in desperate need for this today.

**Pray for justice,** but never out of anger or a need for revenge. Do it only because you long to see righteousness in the land and God's glory fill the earth because he has subdued all of his enemies.

**Pray for the conversion of those you are praying about.** While the glory of God is The End you should have in mind, their salvation and not their damnation is the end you should have in mind *for them*. Anyone who prays for God to damn another person has never known God's mercy themselves. In another imprecatory verse that is similar to some in our psalm, David prays, "**Fill their faces with shame, that they may seek your name, O LORD**" (Ps 83:16). No affliction is too

great that is can't cause someone to seek the LORD, in fact that is why God often brings them into people's lives, especially those whom he will call to himself. Remember Nebuchadnezzar and all the horrible things he did, and how God repaid him by making him become as a wild beast for seven years. He turned to the LORD and confessed him as King. God is powerful to do such things through our prayers of imprecation.

And at the end of the day, if he doesn't see fit to save a person (that is his prerogative, and his alone), know that it isn't because he is evil, but because they are. And rather than show compassion, he has decided to show justice instead. Justice for what they *deserve*. Just like it would be what you deserve if he hadn't shown mercy to you. If he does this, and he has many times, know that he is glorified in that even as he is in showing his grace. Grace is not what you deserve. That is why it is so amazing.

Don't be afraid of such songs. But learn to understand each of them in the fullest context of what they are and how the psalmist conducts himself in the face of his enemies. Then God will be pleased with your faith, for it is living and

active, it is humble and merciful, it loves justice and kindness, and this is the end for which he has saved you.