

# *The Psalms: Their History, Teachings, and Use*

by  
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## Book II "The Theology of the Psalms"

### Chapter VII "The Imprecations"

Of all the features which characterise the style of Personal Religion unfolded in the Psalms, there is none that has given rise to so much unfavourable comment as the vindictive spirit which some of them appear to breathe. It is not to be denied, that in a very considerable number of places the desire is expressed, in one form or another, that God would pour out the vials of his wrath on the enemies of the Psalmist or of Zion; that he would not forgive their iniquity, but give them the due reward of their deeds. Besides isolated and minor examples of prayers of this kind, there are, in at least three psalms,--the 35th, the 69th, and the 109th,--long and terrible imprecations of evil. Thus in the SIXTY-NINTH we read:--

21. They gave me also gall for my food;  
    And in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink.
22. Let their table before them become a snare;  
    And when they are in peace let it become a trap.
23. Let their eyes be darkened, that they see not,  
    And make their loins continually to shake.
24. Pour out upon them thine indignation,  
    And let the heat of thy wrath overtake them.
25. Let their home be desolate;  
    In their tents let there be no dweller.
26. For him whom thou, even thou, hast smitten do they persecute;  
    And of the grief of thy wounded ones they talk.
27. Add iniquity unto their iniquity;  
    And let them not come into thy righteousness.
28. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living;  
    And with the righteous let them not be written.

This class of passages have been subjected, especially in modern times, to unmeasured condemnation as the offspring of a "savage spirit."<sup>1</sup> Not only have the enemies of divine revelation made a handle of them for their purposes, but some Christian interpreters have been betrayed into a style of remark which, if it could be justified, would necessitate the removal of the Psalter from the place which it has hitherto occupied in the worship of the

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley, *Lectures on the Jewish Church*, ii. 153.

Church. On this account, therefore, as well as on account of the embarrassment sometimes felt by persons the most devout and loyal in their allegiance to God's Word, the subject claims attention here.

In a question of this kind, it is expedient to begin by making a careful survey of the facts bearing on the case. Much of the offence that has been taken can be traced to sheer misunderstanding. Even in regard to those points which remain obscure and difficult after the most careful survey, the labour will not be lost; for an intelligent and circumspect consideration of the whole matter will effectually exclude the presumptuous dogmatism into which some of the critics have fallen. What then are the facts?

The first circumstance that claims notice is the rather significant one that, with a few unimportant exceptions, the psalms in question come from the pen of David. This is significant in several respects. For one thing, David was about as devoid of vindictiveness as any public character who can well be named. His conduct in relation to Saul, from first to last, displayed a singularly noble spirit, far removed from anything like the lust of vengeance; and the meekness with which he endured the bitter reproaches of Shimei, bore witness to the same spirit after his accession to the throne. His dying charge to Solomon with regard to Joab and Shimei has been cited as a set-off against the better passages of his life. But this is hardly just. Regarding Shimei our information is scanty; but there can be little doubt that the motive which dictated the king's bequest in the other case was something very different from the cruel, implacable, and cowardly remembrance of personal affronts, which is all that some are willing to see in it. Joab had repeatedly "shed the blood of war in peace," and the dying king felt that he ought to have been put to death long ago. But he was a formidable person. As the king's nephew, the captain of the host, and one of the ablest men in the nation, he was not so much David's subject, as his partner and rival in the sovereign power,--a man too high for the sword of justice to reach during David's unsettled reign. In the well founded anticipation that Solomon's throne would be firmer than his own had ever been, the king bequeathed to him the duty of executing vengeance for an offence which would otherwise be a stain on the government, and might bring down the judgment of God on the royal house.

When David's whole career is intelligently and fairly reviewed, it leaves on the mind the impression of a man possessed of as meek and placable a temper as was ever associated with so great strength of will and such strong passions. Even in the heats of sudden resentment, he was not apt to be hurried into deeds of revenge. Such being the case, it would certainly have been a strange and unaccountable thing if he had shewn himself less the master of his own spirit in poems composed in seasons of retirement and communion with God; especially since these very poems express a keen sense of the heinousness of the sin that has been laid to his charge. He can affirm regarding his implacable enemies, "As for me, when they were sick, my clothing was sackcloth: I humbled my soul with fasting, and my prayer returned to mine own bosom. I behaved myself as though he had been my friend or brother: I bowed down heavily as one that mourneth for his mother."<sup>2</sup> "O Lord, my God, if I have done this; if there be iniquity in my hands; if I have rewarded evil unto him that was at peace with me; (yea, I have delivered him that without cause was mine enemy); let the

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2 Psalm 35:13, 14, one of the "Imprecatory Psalms."

enemy persecute my soul, and take it; yea, let him tread down my life upon the earth."<sup>3</sup> Surely one ought to think twice before putting on the imprecations an interpretation which would make them utterly incongruous with these appeals, uttered almost in the same breath.

This suggests a second circumstance of great importance. Examination shews that the imprecations are not the utterance of resentment for private injuries or of a base desire to see personal enemies laid low. Sometimes, as in the wish expressed for the destruction of Edom and Babylon in the Hundred and thirty-seventh psalm, the objects of the imprecation are the nations which have cruelly wronged the people of God. At other times, if the psalmist seems to call down the divine vengeance on personal foes, it will be found that the person who speaks is always David, and that he speaks in his public character, as the chosen servant of the Lord and Anointed King of Israel; and that he has in view, not his own particular foes, but the enemies of the cause of which he is the representative,--the cause of God, and of truth and righteousness in Israel. To forget David's singular position in the nation, and to read these psalms of his as if they were the utterances of some private individual in reference to neighbours who had done him a private wrong, is to leave out of the account the principal element in the case. It was not David who sought the throne, but the Lord who "set him apart for himself,"<sup>4</sup> and he chose and anointed him to the kingdom, in order that, in his reign, the seed of Jacob might exhibit the most perfect representation the world had yet seen of the predestined kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. His enemies,--whether the unprincipled servants of Saul, like Doeg, who plotted his destruction before he obtained the crown; or the conspirators who, like Ahithophel, sought to pluck the crown from his head by the hands of his own children,--were men whose hatred of David arose out of, and derived its peculiar character from, a hatred of the cause of which David, with all his faults, was the champion and embodiment.

We see, accordingly, that the evil deprecated by the psalmist is not so much the reproach and wrong which he and his people suffer, as the dishonour done to the name of the Lord. So long as his enemies prosper in their wicked counsels, they can plausibly say "God hath forgotten; He hideth his face; He will never see it."<sup>5</sup> They can even please themselves with the thought that "there is no God."<sup>6</sup> What he desires is that God would no longer sleep,--that he would arise and lift up his hand, so that all should be constrained to take notice of it. His fear is that if God give him over to the power of his enemies, a fatal wound will be inflicted on the faith of afflicted saints in ages to come. They will be tempted to say: David was raised up by God to be his servant; yet He forsook him, so that he sunk beneath the malice of those who hated him for the sake of his piety. Hence his prayer is, "Let not them that wait on thee, O Lord GOD of hosts, be ashamed for my sake: let not those that seek thee be confounded for my sake, O God of Israel!"<sup>7</sup>

The motive of the imprecations is not to be sought in a sense of private wrong or of wounded honour, not in personal selfish vindictiveness, but in a holy regard to the glory of

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3 Psalm 7:4, 5.

4 Psalm 4:3.

5 Psalm 10:11.

6 Psalm 14:1.

7 Psalm 69:6.

God, trodden in the dust and given over to contemptuous blasphemy. If the psalmist startles us with the vehement exultation with which he looks forward to the hour (which, his faith tells him, will soon arrive) when God will come forth from his place, and shew himself to his affrighted enemies, it is not to be forgotten that the thing which yields him so much joy is not the vengeance itself, or the fearful destruction of his enemies, but the public vindication of the divine justice, the unequivocal demonstration of the reality and power of the divine government. "The righteous shall rejoice 'that he hath beheld the vengeance:' he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked. So that a man shall say, Verily there is a reward for the righteous; verily, 'there is a God' that judgeth in the earth."<sup>8</sup>

Yet another fact must be mentioned. The frequency with which the Old Testament scriptures are cited by our blessed Lord and the writers of the New Testament, and the marked deference with which the citations are made, have always and justly been regarded as a strong testimony to the plenary authority of the ancient scriptures. Well, it is remarkable that the psalms under discussion have been counted worthy of an eminent share in this honour. The Sixty-ninth, for example, which bears more of the imprecatory character than any other except the Hundred and ninth, is expressly quoted in five separate places, besides being alluded to in several places more. Among all the psalms, there are only some three or four others that have been so largely quoted by Christ and the apostles; and they are all great Messianic hymns.<sup>9</sup>

The *nature* of the quotations is even more significant than their number. It would seem that our Lord appropriated the psalm to himself, and that we are to take it as a disclosure of thoughts and feelings which found a place in his heart during the period of his ministry on the earth. In the Guest Chamber, he quoted the words of the fourth verse: "They hated me without a cause;" and represented them as a prediction of the people's hatred of the Father and of himself.<sup>10</sup> When he drove the traffickers from the temple, John informs us that "his disciples remembered that it was written, The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up;"<sup>11</sup> which implies that those words of the psalm expressed the very mind that was in Christ. When Peter, after mentioning the crime and perdition of Judas, suggested to the company of the Hundred and twenty disciples that they ought to take measures for the appointment of a new apostle to fill the vacant place, he enforced the suggestion by a quotation: "For it is written in the Book of Psalms, Let his habitation be desolate, and let no man dwell therein, and his bishoprick let another take:"<sup>12</sup>--manifestly on the supposition that this psalm and the Hundred and ninth (for the quotation is from them both) were written with reference to Judas. In the Epistle to the Romans, the duty of pleasing, every one of us, our neighbour for his good, is enforced by the apostle with the argument that "even Christ pleased not himself, but as it is written, The reproaches of them that reproached thee, fell on me:"<sup>13</sup> an argument which has no weight if David alone is the speaker in the psalm,--if Christ be not,

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8 Psalm 58:10, 11. Comp. Kurtz, *Zur Theologie der Psalmen* (Dorpat, 1865), p. 169. The whole chapter devoted to the Imprecatory Psalms is thoughtful and valuable; much superior to the rest of the little Treatise, which, as a whole, is scarcely worthy of the learned author. Comp. also the note in his *Lehrbuch der heiligen Geschichte*, sec. 84.

9 Psalms 2, 22, 110, 118, are the four most frequently quoted in the New Testament.

10 John 15:25.

11 John 2:17.

12 Acts 1:20.

13 Psalm 69:9.

in some real sense, the speaker in it also. Finally; we are taught in the same epistle to recognise a fulfilment of the psalmist's most terrible imprecations, in the judicial blindness which befell the body of the Jewish nation after the crucifixion of Christ.<sup>14</sup> All this proves that, if we are not to reject the authority of the apostles and of Christ himself, we must take this imprecatory psalm as having been spoken by David as the ancestor and type of Christ. I do not say, that the circumstance that these psalms are so unequivocally endorsed and appropriated by our blessed Lord explains the difficulty they involve. But I am sure, that the simple statement of it will constrain disciples of Christ to touch them with a reverent hand; and rather to distrust their own judgment, than to brand such scriptures as the products of an unsanctified and unchristian temper.

Coming now to the great question brought up by these Imprecatory Psalms, are we in a condition to throw any light upon it? It is the undoubted law of Christ that we should love our enemies, bless them that curse us, do good to them that hate us, pray for them that despitefully use us and persecute us. Can we explain how the language of the psalmists can be reconciled with the sentiments and conduct enjoined in that command?

In some instances, the reconciliation is easy. Take, for example, the prayer with which the Hundred and fourth Psalm concludes, "Let the sinners be consumed out of the earth, and let the wicked be no more." The psalm is a meditation on God's works in nature, and has excited the admiration of the historians of Natural Science as the fullest and brightest expression of that sympathy with nature, and appreciation of its unity, in which the sacred poets so remarkably excelled all the pagan writers.<sup>15</sup> At first sight it seems unaccountable that such a sunny joyous ode should be wound up with a petition for the rooting out of wicked men; it seems a jarring note in the song with which the church expresses her participation in the joy of her Lord over their fair world, the product of his beneficent wisdom. But, in truth, the prayer is both in harmony with the song and necessary to its completeness. An anecdote will explain my meaning. It fell to my lot some years ago, to undertake a walk of some miles, on a summer morning, along a sea-shore of surpassing beauty. It was the Lord's Day and the language of the Hundred and fourth Psalm rose spontaneously in my mind as one scene after another unfolded itself before the eye. About half way to my destination the road lay through a dirty hamlet, and my meditations were rudely interrupted by the brawling of some people, who looked as if they had been spending the night in a drunken debauch. Well, I thought, the psalmist must have had some such unpleasant experience. He must have fallen in with people, located in some scene of natural beauty, who, instead of being a holy priesthood to give voice to nature in praise of her Creator,--instead of being, in the pure and holy tenor of their lives, the heavenliest note of the general song,--filled it with a harsh discord. His prayer is the vehement expression of a desire that the earth may no longer be marred by the presence of wicked men,--that they may be utterly consumed, and may give place to men animated with the fear of God, just and holy men, men that shall be a crown of beauty on the head of this fair creation. If this be the right explanation of the Psalmist's prayer, it is not only justifiable, but there is something wrong in our meditations on nature, if we are not disposed to join in it.

With respect to the more difficult imprecations, there is an explanation which has found a

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14 Verses 22 and 23, compared with Rom. 11:9, 10.

15 Humboldt's *Kosmos* vol. ii. 413 (Bohn's Ed.)

good deal of acceptance among recent critics. It lays great stress on the difference between the Old Testament and the New; on the "defects of the Jewish system," and the alleged "vindictive spirit of the ancient dispensation."<sup>16</sup> Sometimes this explanation is urged in a spirit of undisguised hostility to the Old Testament, by persons who, although they do not venture to make a direct assault on apostolical Christianity, hope to wound it through the prior dispensation. But it is sometimes urged also in good faith, by divines who desire to hold fast their allegiance to the whole Word of God. Deeming it vain to justify the imprecations, they endeavour to save the divine authority of the scriptures by insisting on the inferiority of the Jewish economy. They call attention to the obvious and admitted facts, that many things not consistent with the rule of eternal justice were "suffered" to the Jews "because of the hardness of their hearts;" and that the Advent of Christ, and the Mission of the Comforter, have ministered assistance to Christ's people in the cultivation of a higher style of holiness than prevailed under the former dispensation: and they argue that it is no disparagement to the Scriptures, if some of the ancient psalmists are occasionally betrayed into the utterance of vindictive feelings, irreconcilable with the Christian temper.<sup>17</sup>

Of the explanation, as urged in this guarded way, I would speak with all respect. It is most certain that faith in the divine authority of the whole Bible does not oblige us to defend all that the ancient saints said or did: and there is no doubt that the people of God have been elevated, under the gospel, to a general level of religious attainment, higher than was reached by the faithful under the law. Nevertheless, the explanation must be rejected, even in its most guarded and qualified form. Prayers which were not only offered by particular saints, but which God by his prophets taught the Church to offer in the perpetual service of song, are not to be charged with any taint of sinful passion.

Besides, it occurs to ask, what foundation there is for attributing to the Old Testament the "vindictive spirit" of which it is the fashion to speak so confidently; whether there is really any ground for making such a difference between the two dispensations with respect to this particular sentiment. Certainly, there is no lack in the Law of Moses of precepts identical in their tenor with the much quoted words of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount; precepts which, for the charitable spirit they breathe, are not surpassed by anything in the Christian Scriptures. "If thou meet thine enemy's ox or his ass going astray, thou shalt surely bring it back to him again. If thou see the ass of him that hateth thee lying under his burden and wouldest forbear to help him, thou shalt surely help with him."<sup>18</sup> "Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thine heart: thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. I am the LORD."<sup>19</sup> The defensive attitude which the church had to assume towards the nations, prior to the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, rendered necessary a line of action, in some respects, which may be plausibly represented as expressing "a hateful particularism;" but, from the first, the kindly and charitable spirit enjoined in the Mosaic precepts was known and felt to be obligatory on the people of God, toward their neighbours foreign and domestic. Thus Job in his eloquent protestation of integrity does not forget this point of duty: "If I rejoiced at the destruction of

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16 Stanley, *Heb. Church*, ii. 153.

17 Perowne, *Book of Psalms*, vol. i. pp. 73-75; also on Psalm 35 (vol. i. 159).

18 Exod. 23:4, 5.

19 Lev. 19:17, 18.

him that hated me, or lifted up myself when evil found him: neither have I suffered my mouth to sin by wishing a curse to his soul."<sup>20</sup>

It is to be observed, that the New Testament does not profess to add one jot to our knowledge of the will of God in this matter. When Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, commands us to love our enemies and to pray for them which despitefully use us and persecute us, he does this, not in the way of setting forth a new commandment, as so many have strangely supposed, but rather in the way of rescuing the old commandment from the perverse glosses of the scribes, and setting it forth anew with his endorsement. We find accordingly that the apostle, in dissuading his readers from taking vengeance, sends them back to the law of Moses, and fetches from it his decisive argument: "Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord."<sup>21</sup>

If the explanation under review thus grievously errs in depreciating the Old Testament, it errs no less in the one-sided view it presents of the mind of Christ, the genuine Christian temper. That temper has another aspect besides the one presented in the Sermon on the Mount. The New Testament may not contain any imprecations so awfully emphatic, reiterated, and specific as those which are to be found in two or three psalms; but imprecations are by no means lacking. The apostles of Christ occasionally used language with reference to their opponents which, in point of principle, cannot be distinguished from that of David. Thus Peter, in rebuking Simon Magus for his heartless hypocrisy, expressed the wish that he might perish, he and his money along with him.<sup>22</sup> This, it may be argued, was spoken in great heat,--the heat of what was doubtless a just anger,--but in heat nevertheless; and ought therefore to be taken with some abatement. But what shall we say to the imprecation of Paul against Alexander the coppersmith, that "the Lord might reward him according to his works?"<sup>23</sup> The wish was uttered by the apostle in the heavenliest of all his writings, the serene epistle in which he sent his farewell to his own son in the faith. Nor is it only on this side the grave that Christ's saintly servants have uttered such words. There is a vision in the Revelation which plainly warrants us to attribute similar imprecations to the saints who, having "come out of the great tribulation," are now before the throne: "I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God. . . . And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?"<sup>24</sup> Whether we can account for such sentiments or not, one thing is clear, that the difficulty raised by the imprecations is by no means peculiar to the Psalms. If the psalmists are condemned, the condemnation must be extended also to the apostles of Christ. And this, in fact, is done by the abler and more candid of the rationalising divines.<sup>25</sup>

It is sufficiently plain, therefore, that even if the Imprecatory Psalms had not received a special endorsement from Christ and the apostles, it would have been idle to seek the

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20 Job 31:29, 30.

21 Rom. 12:19; Deut. 32:35.

22 Acts 8:20.

23 2 Tim. 4:14.

24 Rev. 6:9, 10.

25 Hupfeld, *Die Psalmen*, at Psalm 69:23-29.

explanation of them in the diverse characters of the Old and New Testaments. To curse an enemy is just as severely forbidden in the Old Testament as in the New; and passages are to be found in the New Testament which bear the imprecatory character quite as distinctly as any in the Old. In this matter, both Testaments stand or fall together; and we must look to some other quarter than their differences (whatever these may be) for the explanation of the difficulty under review.

In looking round for light on a question of this kind, it is always well to bear in mind that there are dark places in God's Word, the perfect elucidation of which is not to be hoped for in the present life. From the circumstance that the imprecations, after all that has been written about them these many centuries, still give rise to much embarrassment and anxious discussion, it is sufficiently evident that they present a real difficulty. And it is no evidence of strong faith in the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, but the very reverse, to be afraid to acknowledge the existence of such a difficulty. If there had been no difficulties in the Bible, it would not have been like its Author. If, in its teachings, there had been nothing too deep for my understanding to fathom, and nothing embarrassing to the feelings of my heart, I might well have presumed that it was of merely human origin, and that the thoughts unfolded in it were only the thoughts of fallible men like myself. The revelation that God has made of himself in *Providence* is certainly not devoid of difficulties. On the contrary, we may say of it what the Apostle Peter remarked of the epistles of his beloved brother Paul, that in it "are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest . . . unto their own destruction."<sup>26</sup> God's way is often in the sea, and his path in the great waters, and his footsteps are not known. A sense of this made one of the psalmists exclaim, "O LORD, how great are thy works! And thy thoughts are very deep."<sup>27</sup> The "thoughts" thus reverently adored are those to which God has given expression in his works; for every act of God's Providence is the embodiment of a thought of his heart. God's Providence, I repeat, shews many a dark passage. We often find it hard to discover what his meaning is; too often, moreover, when he makes his meaning plain enough, our hearts rebel against it. It ought not therefore to be thought surprising, if we find in the Imprecations of the Psalter some things which remain hard to be understood, and liable to be wrested by men to their own destruction.

But, without professing to be able to dissipate every shadow, or to set the whole matter in a clear light, I think it will be possible to indicate the direction in which a satisfactory solution of the main difficulty is to be found.

Let these two considerations be duly weighed:--(1.) However dreadful the evils may be which the psalmists imprecate,--and they are dreadful beyond expression,--there is not one of them which God does not, in fact, send on wicked men. Let them be translated into the language of History, and the truth of the imprecations will at once be recognised.

"Destruction cometh upon the wicked at unawares; his net that he hath hid catcheth himself; into that very destruction he falleth. . . . Their eyes are darkened that they see not, and their bones are made continually to shake. The Lord poureth out upon them his indignation, and the heat of his wrath overtaketh them. The Lord addeth iniquity unto their iniquity, and suffereth them not to come into his righteousness. They are blotted out of the

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26 2 Peter 3:16.

27 Psalm 92:5.

book of the living; and with the righteous they are not written." I suppose no person ever reads the Sixty-ninth and Hundred and ninth Psalms, attentively, without being reminded of Judas Iscariot and the Jewish people who crucified the Lord of glory; indeed the latter psalm used to be denominated, in the ancient church, "the Ischariote Psalm."<sup>28</sup>

When the apostle, in the epistle to the Romans, describes that judicial hardening of his Jewish kinsmen which was going on before his eyes, and in which he saw the sure token of their impending destruction, he brings in the words of the Sixty-ninth Psalm as the fittest for his purpose: "David saith, Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumblingblock, and a recompense unto them. Let their eyes be darkened that they may not see, and bow down their back alway."<sup>29</sup> It is worthy of notice that the apostle's account of what God at that time did to the Jews, calling some of them by his grace and hardening others;--his simple statement of the facts as they had taken place before his eyes,--has given rise to the very same sort of hostile criticism as we are familiar with in regard to the imprecation of them by the psalmist.

This goes far to show that the real difficulty lies *in the facts themselves*, rather than in the language of the sacred writers with reference to them. Such things as David imprecates, and Paul records, are not to be spoken of but with fear and trembling. Nevertheless, it is certain that they take place, and that they enter into the plan of the divine government; and who will dare affirm that God is unrighteous, who thus taketh vengeance on bold presumptuous sinners? Vengeance belongs to his prerogative, and his terrible acts in executing it are not to be challenged by any creature.

(2) Not only are these dreadful judgments, in fact, poured out by God on those who proudly reject his grace and persecute his people; but we are bound to take notice of his hand in such dispensations, and even to rejoice--not indeed with levity, but rather with solemnity and tears, nevertheless to rejoice--in what God has done. When John saw in the Apocalypse the vials of God's wrath poured on the earth, and the sea, and the rivers and fountains of water, he "heard the angel of the waters say, Thou art righteous, O Lord, because thou hast judged thus: for they have shed the blood of saints and prophets, and thou hast given them blood to drink: for they are worthy."<sup>30</sup> In like manner when he saw Babylon fall, he heard this exhortation, "Rejoice over her thou heaven, and ye holy apostles and prophets; for God hath avenged you on her."<sup>31</sup>

Thus far, there can hardly be any difference of opinion among those who receive the Scriptures as the Word of God. And the considerations adduced indicate the light in which the Imprecatory Psalms are to be read. The commentators, such as Horne and Henry, whose sole object is the edification of their readers, have been used to say that David's words are to be understood not as expressing desire, but as predicting the doom of the enemies of God. If this explanation be offered as the strict interpretation of the words, it must be rejected. It is certain that the psalmist speaks in the *imperative*, not in the *future* merely. Nevertheless, I as little doubt that the explanation contains much truth, and comes

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28 *Psalmus Ischarioticus*. See Delitzsch (at Psalm 109.).

29 Chap. 11:9, 10.

30 Rev. 16:5, 6.

31 Rev. 18:20.

nearer the mark than those that are offered by some more ambitious interpreters, who see nothing in the words but private vindictiveness. Imprecations which were uttered in the Spirit, by one whom God had constituted the living representative of the cause of truth in the world, were, in effect, predictive denunciations of the doom of those against whom they were spoken, and are to be read as such.<sup>32</sup>

This view of the matter, in itself most reasonable, is powerfully enforced by the circumstance already adverted to, that Christ is in these psalms as well as David, and that they were spoken with a prophetic reference to his betrayers and murderers. They were applied by Christ to the unbelieving Jews, when (with evident allusion to the Sixty-ninth Psalm) he foretold that their house was about to be left unto them desolate!<sup>33</sup> They were expressly applied, as we have seen, by one apostle to Judas Iscariot, and by another to the general body of the nation.<sup>34</sup> Many divines of great eminence, like Augustine and Luther, apply these psalms (especially the Sixty-ninth and Hundred and ninth) exclusively to Christ and his betrayers. That is probably an extreme view: they seem plainly to express the sentiments of David, in the first instance. Nevertheless, I do not doubt that the remoter interpretation indicated by the New Testament quotations, is the one on which the mind ought principally to rest in the devotional use of the psalms; and that our aim ought to be to avail ourselves of their assistance in reverently adoring the justice of God when He takes vengeance on the incorrigible enemies of Christ.

One other point has yet to be noticed. It cannot be denied that, like the imprecations of the apostles and of the souls under the altar, the language of the psalmist has reference not only to judgments already executed, but to judgments which are viewed as still future and in suspense. It brings up the question, What ought to be our sentiment with respect to such judgments?

In reply to this question, I do not hesitate to say that, as a rule, our duty is to *deprecate* them, and not to *imprecate* them. Even although we see reason to conclude that they are surely coming, we ought to cry aloud for mercy to be shewn to the transgressors. The Lord Jesus prayed for his murderers; and we ought to do likewise. To make the imprecatory psalms the vehicle of maledictions against personal enemies is a frightful abuse of God's holy word. Calvin states, as a thing notorious in his time, that certain monks,--the Franciscans especially,--made a trade of this detestable sacrilege. If any one had a mortal enemy and wished him destroyed, he would hire one of those wretches to curse him day by day in the words of the Hundred and ninth psalm. The reformer adds, that he himself knew a lady of

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32 This is well brought out by Augustine in a Sermon on Psalm 68:2 (Serm. 22, Ed. Bened.), "In the words (of the Psalmist) there is indeed the expressing of desire; but the language is figurative, and is to be understood as denoting the prescience of one who foretells. For, as it is the manner of prophetic scripture, in predicting things yet future, to narrate them as if they were already past; even so, certain things are spoken, as it were by way of *prayer*, while yet they who rightly understand the words perceive in them rather *the intuition of a prophet*. Thus the prophet, speaking of Judas the traitor, as it were desires for him the doom which he foretells as awaiting him. Nor is it without reason that things future are spoken of as if already accomplished. For to God they are so certain, that they may be esteemed already done; and the prophet seems to express, by way of desire, that which he foresees will certainly come to pass; *the intention, so far as I can see, being nothing else but to teach us that the counsel of God, his fixed and immoveable determination, ought not to be displeasing to us.*"

33 Matt. 23:38. Comp. Psalm 69:25.

34 Acts 1:20; Rom. 11:9.

rank in France who hired certain Franciscans to imprecate perdition in this way on her only son.<sup>35</sup> Matthew Henry, after mentioning these shameful facts, makes this reflection, that "greater impiety can scarcely be imagined, than to vent a devilish passion in the language of sacred writ; to kindle strife with coals snatched from God's altar; and to call for fire from heaven with a tongue set on fire of hell." Those who are capable of such daring profanity (one may well believe it has never shewn its head in any Protestant church) would not be dissuaded by any argument of ours: but it is not unnecessary to observe that it would be a dangerous and over-bold use of these psalms, to recite them even against those who are our enemies in some good and holy work. When James and John proposed to imitate Elijah by commanding fire to come down from heaven and consume certain Samaritans who opposed their passage to Jerusalem, the Lord "turned, and rebuked them, and said, Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of; for the Son of man is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."<sup>36</sup>

This, I repeat, is the rule by which we are to walk. We are to bless them that curse us, and to pray for them that despitefully use us, and persecute us. But there are exceptions even to this rule. One of these is pointed out by the loving disciple, in a quarter where, but for his intimation, we might well have deemed the rule absolute. If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it."<sup>37</sup>

There are other exceptions. It is plain that Civil Communities and their Officers are not to walk by the letter of Christ's commandment. The civil magistrate is neither obliged, nor at liberty, to forgive those who trespass against him. "He is the minister of God, *a revenger to execute wrath* upon him that doeth evil."<sup>38</sup> It is at his peril if he refuse or neglect to perform this office; and all private persons whose minds have not been corrupted by a false sentimentality will concur with him in the execution of his stern duty. When a foul crime has been perpetrated, tender-hearted Christian women, who would not touch a hair of their enemy's head, but would rather feed him, will express a keen resentment, and will be disquieted in mind till they hear that the perpetrator has been convicted and duly punished. They will imprecate civil justice on the offender. It is their hearty desire and prayer that the violated majesty of the law may not remain unrevenged.

I do believe that facts like these, if they were fairly considered, would be felt to throw much light on the Bible imprecations. If we had more of the psalmist's consuming zeal for the cause of God; if we were as much concerned for the honour of the divine government as every virtuous citizen is for the honour of the national laws, the imprecations would sound less strange and harsh in our ears. This has been well pointed out by an eminent foreign divine. "David is the Old Testament type of the inviolable majesty of Christ; and therefore his imprecations are prophetic of the final doom of all the hardened enemies of Christ and his church: and in this sense the Christian appropriates them in prayer. Thus turned to account they are a wholesome antidote to the religious sentimentality of our time, which shuts its eyes to the truth that God's wrath against impenitent despisers of his grace is at

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35 Commentary on Psalm 109:6.

36 Luke 9:55, 56.

37 1 John 5:16.

38 Rom. 13:4.

once necessary and salutary;--necessary, because demanded by the divine justice; salutary, because conducing to the victory and consummation of the kingdom of God. As such, they are simply an expansion of the prayer, Thy kingdom come. For the kingdom of God comes not only by the shewing of mercy to the penitent, but also by the executing of judgment on the impenitent."<sup>39</sup>

I will not maintain that the Imprecatory Psalms are to be the Christian's constant song. Many godly persons, who would be the last to charge them with sin, are accustomed to omit them, for the most part, in the regular consecutive singing of the Psalms. Certainly, they ought never to be sung but with fear and trembling. Nevertheless, at fit seasons, they may and ought to find a place in our service of praise. It has been justly said, that "in a deep sense of moral evil, more perhaps than in anything else, abides a saving knowledge of God."<sup>40</sup> There is "a hatred of them that hate God," which is the invariable accompaniment and indispensable token of the love of God in the heart.<sup>41</sup> And sin is to be looked upon not only as a disease to be loathed, but as a violation of law which calls for punishment. As powerful witnesses for the truth that sin is hateful to God and deserving of his wrath and everlasting curse,--a truth which the world would fain forget,--the Imprecatory Psalms must be accounted worthy of their place in the Divine Manual of Praise.

"The Imprecations" in William Binnie, *The Psalms: Their History, Teachings, and Use* (T. Nelson and Sons, 1870).

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<sup>39</sup> Kurtz, *Zur Theol. d. Psalmen*, p. 173.

<sup>40</sup> Dr. Arnold's life, p. 662.

<sup>41</sup> Psalm 139:21, 22.