

IMPRECATORY PRAYERS IN MODERN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES, A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON IMPLICATION FOR THE PRESENT AND FUTURE EDWARD AGBOADA¹

ABSTRACT

There is a class of so-called "imprecatory" (cursing) prayers in the Bible; it does not seem to agree with the totality of Bible message. Getting specific Moses cursed Pharaoh (Ex. 9:16). Samuel cursed Saul (1 Sam. 13:13-14; 15:28). Elijah and Micaiah cursed Ahab (1 Kin. 21:17-24; 22:19-23). Amos cursed Israel (Amos 9:9-10). Jesus cursed the Pharisees (Mt. 23). Paul cursed Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 4:14). The engendering question has been whether there should be such prayers. What should be their place in worship? The focus of this article is to discuss the use of these imprecatory prayers in modern Christian church services and decipher implication for the present and future.

Keywords: *Prayer, Imprecatory, Cursing, Worship, Christian, Church, Modern*

INTRODUCTION

Although the early church and Christians throughout history have prayed strong, influential prayers against the enemies of God - as David did – many today, do not even know what imprecatory prayer is. Christians today are very confused about this matter, because we have forgotten the concept of the "Church militant" - the Church that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 16:18. The Church that is on the offensive, taking the battle to the very gates of Hell. One subject which has raised serious challenge to dialectic Christian theological discourse is the place of imprecatory prayers in modern Christian churches."

These prayers express the desire for God's vengeance to fall on His (and His people's) enemies and include the use of actual curses, or imprecations. Such prayers naturally evoke a reaction of revulsion in many Christians. For are not Christians to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44), "bless and not curse" (Rom. 12:14)? How then does one justify calls for the brutal dashing of infants against a rock (Ps. 137:9) or the washing of one's "feet in the blood of the wicked" (58:10)? Are the imprecatory texts merely a way of venting rage without really meaning it? Or is cursing enemies the Old Testament way and loving enemies the New Testament way?

Has the morality of Scripture evolved? And is it in any way legitimate to use these texts in Christian life and worship? The purposes that govern expression of imprecations and the principal themes that run repeatedly through them are on the highest ethical plane. This include concern for the honour of God and for the public recognition of His sovereignty (e.g., 59:13; 74:22), concern for the realization of justice in the face of rampant injustice, along with the hope that divine retribution will cause people to seek the Lord (e.g., 58:11; 83:16), an abhorrence of sin (139:21), and a concern for the preservation of the righteous (35:1, 4).

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What is Prayer?

Prayer is a significant and universal aspect of religion, whether of aboriginal peoples or of modern mystics, that expresses the broad range of religious feelings and attitudes that command man's relations with the sacred or holy. Described by some scholars as religion's primary mode of expression, prayer is said to be to religion what rational thought is to philosophy; it is the very expression of living religion. Prayer distinguishes the phenomenon of religion from those phenomena that approach it or resemble it, such as religious and aesthetic feelings.

From its primitive to its mystical expression, prayer expresses a desire on the part of men to enter into contact with the sacred or holy. As a part of that desire, prayer is linked to a feeling of presence (of the sacred or holy), which is neither an abstract conviction nor an instinctive intuition but rather a volitional movement conscious of realizing its higher end. The most basic definition of prayer is “talking to God.” Prayer is not meditation or passive reflection; it is direct address to God. It is the communication of the human soul with the Lord who created the soul.²

Prayer is the primary way for the believer in Jesus Christ to communicate his emotions and desires with God and to fellowship with God. Prayer can be audible or silent, private or public, formal or informal. All prayer must be offered in faith (James 1:6), in the name of the Lord Jesus (John 16:23), and in the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26). As the International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia puts it, “Christian prayer in its full New Testament meaning is, ‘prayer addressed to God as Father, in the name of Christ as Mediator, and through the enabling grace of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.’³

Prayer is described in the Bible as seeking God's favour (Exodus 32:11), pouring out one's soul to the Lord (1 Samuel 1:15), crying out to heaven (2 Chronicles 32:20), drawing near to God (Psalm 73:28, KJV), and kneeling before the Father (Ephesians 3:14). Prayer develops our relationship with God and demonstrates our trust and utter dependence upon Him.

Forms of Prayer

The forms of prayer are varied and various including praise and adoration, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, and petition. We pray to praise God and thank Him and tell Him how much we love Him. We pray to enjoy His presence and tell Him what is going on in our lives. We pray to make requests and seek guidance and ask for wisdom. Fellowship with God is the heart of prayer. When we make petitions to God, we let God know exactly where we stand and what we would like to see happen. Prayer is not seeking our own will but seeking to align ourselves with the will of God more fully (1 John 5:14–15; James 4:3).

What does the Bible say about Prayer?

Prayer is the lifeblood of a Christian's walk with God. Prayer connects us to God, prayer is an active way to love and connect with others. The Bible says to “pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). Prayerlessness is antithetical to a good relationship with God. God's people will have a natural desire to communicate with Him (Psalm 5:3). The biblical commands to pray are accompanied by wonderful promises (Psalm 145:18). Christ is our best example. He Himself was a man of prayer (Luke 3:21; 5:16; 9:18, 28; 11:1), and He taught His followers to pray (Luke 11:2–4).

We are called to pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ (James 5:16). Paul often solicited the prayers of God's people on his behalf (Ephesians 6:19; Colossians 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:25). The prophet

²“What is Prayer?” (n.d.). Retrieved [February 15, 2017], from <https://www.gotquestions.org/what-happens-death.html>.

³“Prayer” by J. C. Lambert, International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia

Samuel saw prayers on behalf of the people of Israel as a necessary part of his ministry: “As for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by failing to pray for you” (1 Samuel 12:23). Jesus tells us that we must also pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). Prayer makes room for the correcting voice of God. As we pray for God’s will to be done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10), the contrariness of our own wills is revealed. Prayerlessness clouds our hearts to the temptations surrounding us and leads to further sin. Prayer is our lifeline and connection to God.

What is imprecatory prayer?

Imprecation is any expressed wish that some form of adversity or misfortune will befall or attach to some other entity: one or more persons, a place, or an object. In particular, "curse" may refer to such a wish or pronouncement made effective by a supernatural or spiritual power, such as a god or gods, a spirit, or a natural force, or else as a kind of spell by magic or witchcraft.⁴ In many belief systems, the curse itself (or accompanying ritual) is considered to have some causative force in the result. In the bible, there are several examples of such acts that are imprecatory; God is depicted as cursing the serpent, the earth, and Cain (Genesis 3:14, 3:17, 4:11).

Similarly, Noah curses Canaan (Genesis 9:25), and Joshua curses the man who should build the city of Jericho (Joshua 6:26-27). In various books of the Bible there are long lists of curses against transgressors of the Law (Leviticus 26:14-25, Deuteronomy 27:15, etc.) In the New Testament, Christ curses the barren fig-tree (Mark 11:14)⁵, pronounces his denunciation of woe against the incredulous cities (Matthew 11:21), against the rich, the worldly, the scribes and the Pharisees, and foretells the awful malediction that is to come upon the damned (Matthew 25:41).

Getting specific, the Bible contains explicit curses against the wicked. Moses cursed Pharaoh (Ex. 9:16). Samuel cursed Saul (1 Sam. 13:13-14; 15:28). Elijah and Micaiah cursed Ahab (1 Kin. 21:17-24; 22:19-23). Amos cursed Israel (Amos 9:9-10). Jesus cursed the Pharisees (Mt. 23). Paul cursed Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20; 2 Tim. 4:14). Imprecatory prayer therefore is a prayer that calls on God to bring evil on individuals or persons. In this case these individuals or persons are considered to be in one way or other the reasons behind ones predicaments and since the bible says vengeance is of the lord, he is called on to act on behalf of the victimized.

Examples of imprecatory prayers in the Bible

The Bible, from Genesis to Revelation is full of imprecatory prayers and the books of both the major and Minor Prophets are full of statements that call on the vengeance of God on the enemies of Israel or God.⁶ Particularly, the book of Psalms is rich with imprecatory prayers. Written by several authors including King David. There are seven types of psalms in this book: lament, thanksgiving, enthronement,

⁴ Jay Rogers, What is Imprecatory Prayer? September 08, 2008. www.forerunner.com/blog/what-is-imprecatoryprayer [Accessed 3 July, 2017], Roy L. Honeycutt, Curse and blessing, Holman Bible Dictionary for Window 1.0g, (Parsons Technology, 1994), Dr. Brandford Yeboah, Themes of the Old Testament, Exegetical Analysis of selected Psalms towards a theological development of the theme of Imprecatory Prayers, (Lecture for Master of Arts in the study of Religions, June – July, 2018)

⁵ William R. Telford., The Barren Temple and the Withered Tree: A Redaction-critical Analysis of the Cursing of the Fig-tree Pericope in Mark's Gospel and Its Relation to the Cleansing of the Temple Tradition [Sheffield: JSOT, 1980], 135

⁶ The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament [Leiden: Brill, 1995], 218; cf. Ps. 68:21-23).

pilgrimage, royal, wisdom, and imprecatory.⁷ Imprecatory psalms are those in which the author imprecates; that is, he calls down calamity, destruction, and God's anger and judgment on his enemies.

Major Imprecatory Psalms include Psalm 69 and Psalm 109, while Psalms 5, 6, 11, 12, 35, 37, 40, 52, 54, 56, 58, 79, 83, 137, 139, and 143 are also considered imprecatory. As a sample, Psalm 69:24 states toward God, "Pour out Your indignation on them, and let your burning anger overtake them" and Psalm 137:9, which declares, "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones." It is important to note however that these psalms were not written out of vindictiveness or a need for personal vengeance.⁸ Instead, they are prayers that keep God's justice, sovereignty, and protection in mind.

God's people had suffered much at the hands of those who opposed them, including the Hittites, Amorites, Philistines, and Babylonians (the subject of Psalm 137). These groups were not only enemies of Israel; they were also enemies of God. They were degenerate and ruthless conquerors who had repeatedly tried and failed to destroy God's chosen people. In writing the imprecatory psalms, the authors sought vindication on God's behalf as much as they sought their own.⁹ While Jesus Himself quoted some imprecatory psalms (John 2:17; 15:25), He also instructed us to love our enemies and pray for them (Matthew 5:44–48; Luke 6:27–38).

The New Testament makes it clear that our enemy is spiritual, not physical (Ephesians 6:12). In as much as it is not entirely out of place to pray imprecatory prayers against the enemy who has intentionally set their heart on harming us, we should also pray with compassion and love (1 Timothy 2:1) We should desire their salvation. After all, God "is patient . . . not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Above all, we should seek the will of God in everything we do and, when we are wronged, leave the ultimate outcome to God (Romans 12:19).

The bottom line of praying imprecatory should be to communicate a deep yearning for justice, written from the point of view of those who had been mightily oppressed. God's people have the promise of divine vengeance: "Will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly" (Luke 18:7–8; cf. Revelation 19:2).

IMPRECATORY PRAYERS IN MODERN CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

The modern Christian church is preoccupied with long days and hours of prayer sessions but majority of these days and hours are spent on damning certain supposed persons considered as both spiritual and/or physical enemies with diabolic agenda or mission to destroy, frustrate, thwart or delay the blessing and opportunities meant for the individual, community or nation state. These enemies first and foremost are considered responsible for 'bad things' such as repetitive failures, delayed miracles and breakthroughs or supposed blessing and access to certain opportunities that are not forth coming.

These enemies are thought of as mercenaries of demons and witches in strongholds or domains operating with or in consultation with family members, relations or friends to destroy that which heaven has designed for the life of the individual. To resist the activities of these supposed enemies, the attention

⁷ The Psalms Chronologically Arranged, with Historical Introductions; and a General Introduction to the Whole Book, 5th ed. [New York: Carlton & Porter, 1856], 120.

⁸ J. Carl Laney, "A Fresh Look at the Imprecatory Psalms," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138 (January-March 1981): 35-45; and Chalmers Martin, "The Imprecations in the Psalms," *Princeton Theological Review* 1 (1903): 537-53; "What happens after death?" (2017). Retrieved (February 15, 2017), from <https://www.gotquestions.org/what-are-the-imprecatory-psalms.html>.

⁹ Commentary on the Book of Psalms, trans. James Anderson [reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979], 2:378; Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 46.

of the church has gradually been shifted from its main agenda. This has brought about the introduction of certain practices including the use of items, invocations and practices earlier on considered the reserve of the priests and priestesses of certain indigenous religions of the African people which has become over popularised by so-called prophets and prophetess of modern Christian churches.

The question then is to what extent do we understand imprecatory prayers as used in the bible and as perpetuated by the priest and priestesses of certain indigenous African religions that have come to form headlines in almost every Christian church activity in recent times.

Understanding what the Church is

Many people today understand the church as a building. This is not a biblical understanding of the church. The word “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia*, which is defined as “an assembly” or “called-out ones.” The root meaning of “church” is not that of a building, but of people. It is ironic that when you ask people what church they attend, they usually identify a building. Romans 16:5 says “... greet the church that is in their house.” Paul refers to the church in their house—not a church building, but a body of believers.

The church is the body of Christ, of which He is the head. Ephesians 1:22-23 says, “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.” The body of Christ is made up of all believers in Jesus Christ from the day of Pentecost (Acts chapter 2) until Christ’s return. The body of Christ is comprised of two aspects:

- 1) The universal church consists of all those who have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. “For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body - whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free - and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:13). This verse says that anyone who believes is part of the body of Christ and has received the Spirit of Christ as evidence. The universal church of God is all those who have received salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.
- 2) The local church is described in Galatians 1:1-2: “Paul, an apostle ... and all the brothers with me, to the churches in Galatia.” Here we see that in the province of Galatia there were many churches - what we call local churches. A Baptist church, Lutheran church, Catholic church, etc., is not the church, as in the universal church - but rather is a local church, a local body of believers. The universal church is comprised of those who belong to Christ and who have trusted Him for salvation. These members of the universal church should seek fellowship and edification in a local church.

In summary, the church is not a building or a denomination. According to the Bible, the church is the body of Christ - all those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation (John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13). Local churches are gatherings of members of the universal church. The local church is where the members of the universal church can fully apply the “body” principles of 1 Corinthians chapter 12: encouraging, teaching, and building one another up in the knowledge and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Understanding what the Mission of the Church is

a) The mission of the Church is to make Disciples.

Just before Jesus returned to heaven, He commissioned His disciples this way: “Go into all the world, make disciples of all nations by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19–20a). As the church makes disciples, people can admire, worship, trust, follow, and obey Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.

b) The Mission of the Church is to glorify Christ.

Paul wrote, “In Christ we were also chosen ... in order that we ... might be for the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:11–12). Part of God’s purpose for the church is to exalt Jesus Christ by the way that the church lives and by what it does. Christ designed His church to represent His supernatural, life-saving work to the world. In His church, Christ shows to the world what a freed and forgiven people can be - people who are satisfied with God as the result of Christ’s joyful, triumphant self-sacrifice. He has planned the church’s values to be His values. He expects its lifestyle to reflect His character (2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; Ephesians 5:23–32; Col 1:13, 18; 1 Tim 3:15). As the moon reflects the sun, so the church is to reflect the glory of God to a dark world.

c) The Mission of the Church is to build up the Saints.

The church is to encourage and comfort its individual members (1 Thess 5:11; 2 Cor 13:11). “There should be no division, but . . . its parts should have equal concern for each other” (2 Cor 12:25). Jesus Christ designed His Church to showcase God’s family on earth, so that the pagan world can see how God builds His family around Jesus Christ and how that family cares for one another (see Mark 3:35 and John 13:35). The mission of the church is to know and love Christ so supremely as to represent Him and His values accurately and vividly to the world and serve people’s deepest needs in the way Christ Himself would meet them.¹⁰

As W. C. Robinson says in Baker’s Dictionary of Theology, “Our Lord Jesus Christ is the sun about which the whole mission of the church revolves. The church’s mission is to present Jesus Christ to the world, while He presents to the same world His rescuing work in and through His church.”¹¹

How are imprecatory prayers helping or not helping the church?

It would be entirely wrong for anybody to completely condemn the place of imprecatory prayers in Christian worship services. It is as important as the art of praying itself. The problem however is that the over emphasis of such prayers has drawn the church into many minor activities. This has resulted in the abandonment of the study of more serious subject regarding salvation, the kingdom of God and the return of Christ. Topics such as love, forgiveness, kindness, patience, longsuffering are no longer being preached because they destroy the foundation of inspiration that encourages imprecatory prayers.

There is the biblical call to nonconformity to teachings and practices that is forcing to draw the attention of the church away from its primary agenda. The church has a double calling: on the one hand to live in the world, and on the other not to conform to the world. The second calling is the call to holiness. We have no liberty to respond to one call without the other. Indeed, we may neither preserve our holiness by escaping from the world, nor may we sacrifice our holiness by conforming to the world. The first is a call to worldliness, as opposed to otherworldliness - getting involved in the life of the world around us.

Now we need to ask ourselves, what are the contemporary trends which threaten to envelop and engulf the church and against which we need to be on guard including the over emphasis of imprecatory prayers. Under what situations can imprecatory prayers be made. The situation in which to offer imprecatory prayer is 1) when it is a cause that God will support, 2) you are suffering a terrible harm and 3) other means of relief are not available. These are not simply prayers of vengeance, but prayers of dependence on God as the only hope of help.

Taking individual vengeance is both wrong and impatient. Rom. 12:19 "Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay,"

¹⁰ John MacArthur, ‘The Master's Plan for the Church’, MOODY PUBLISHERS (2008)

¹¹ W. C. Robinson, Baker’s Dictionary of Theology

says the Lord." Also, anyone who would plead for God to relieve him from the evil of his enemies must truly make sure that his enemy cannot rightly ask for the same relief because of the pleader's action. Finally, the one who would offer the imprecatory prayer needs to do so not with a vengeful and hateful heart but rejoicing in the Lord. This type of prayer is not simply from a desire to harm others, but to have the Lord help stop their evil. When this happens, the joy that we have in the Lord is greatly refreshed.

CONCLUSION

The focus of this article has been to discuss the use of imprecatory prayers in modern Christian church services and decipher implication for the present and future. The position of this article after the discussion is that imprecation has been part of the tradition of the church for a long time and so is imprecatory prayers. The Bible contain in its pages numerous imprecatory text some of which are said to have been spoken, written or commanded by the main actors of the Bible including Jesus Christ himself. It would therefore be entirely wrong for anybody to completely condemn the place of imprecatory prayers in Christian worship services. It is as important as the art of praying itself.

The problem however is that the misuse of such prayers is drawing the church into trivialities some of which threaten the urgency and need of sound biblical teaching and training. Eventually the church is made to wonder about frivolous and imperceptible practices that keeps it a base.

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Suggested Readings

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