

# Episode-220

## Shea Houdmann

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Jeff, Kevin, are joining me today to continue our series in the difficult passages in the Bible. Difficult in the sense that they describe something that's kind of difficult to explain. We've done ones on Abraham sacrificing Isaac, Elisha cursing the young men and bears coming and mauling them, and we've done Ananias and Sapphira. We've done Jesus calling the Canaanite woman dog, which he actually didn't do. Tune in for that episode. Hear what actually was going on in that passage. You get the idea of the ones we're trying to cover today.

## Shea Houdmann

And today might be one of the more difficult ones. Not that there's not an answer, but especially when you get into the real difficult ones, this topic is tough. So today we're going to be discussing the imprecatory psalms or imprecatory prayers we find in the Bible. And I know that word is not a word that we used a whole lot in the English language today. Imprecatory basically means wishing judgment on someone, wanting bad things to happen to someone. And there are examples in the Bible of people asking God to cause bad or awful or even what we consider evil things to happen to other people. So we're going to be discussing some of those. We'll probably focus primarily on Psalm 137, verse 9, because it's, I guess, the strongest of them. But there are some other examples in the Bible where it's just, Lord, judge my enemies. Lord, pay them back for what they've done. Psalm 137 is the strongest language. So let me go ahead and read.

## Shea Houdmann

There's a couple of verses out of Psalm 137. And the context of this is after the Babylonians had conquered Judah and done some pretty horrible things, the psalm was written kind of in response to that. In verses 8 and 9 of Psalm 37, read, O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us. And then verse 9, blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock.

## Shea Houdmann

So here in this psalm, the psalmist is writing, saying, essentially, may what you did to us be done to you. And the Babylonians and Syrians and other nations were famous for one way where they subjugated a nation they conquered brutally would be to take all the infants who were currently alive at that time and kill them either by throwing them off a cliff or bashing their heads

against rocks or between rocks or obviously really horrible things. So here in the psalm, we have the psalmist wanting the same thing to happen to the Babylonians that they had done to them. So Jeff, why don't you start us off? How do we as Christians respond to something like this? And what's maybe the appropriate attitude and wanting the Lord to judge your enemies?

### **Jeff Laird**

I think part of what we have to start with is the idea of recognizing that when we suffer bad things, especially severely bad things, that we tend to respond with a desire that the other person would experience the same thing. And as human beings, it can even be worse. And we sometimes don't realize how casual we can be about this.

### **Jeff Laird**

For example, in English-speaking cultures, a reflexive or a common thing for people to tell somebody when they're mad at them for something that they've done, which is inappropriate, but it's very common, is to tell somebody, well, you go to hell. They use that phrase. And when you really stop and think about that, from a Christian theological perspective, that is literally the worst thing that can happen to somebody. So somebody cut you off in traffic or they took your cheeseburger or something like that. And you're throwing mad at them. Do people necessarily mean it in exactly the way that they're saying it? Maybe, maybe not. But the phrasing of it is pretty rough. And we see a lot of stuff in Psalms where people are expressing really raw emotions.

### **Jeff Laird**

Sometimes they're even expressing those things at God. Habakkuk at one point tells God, how long am I going to pray about stuff? And you're going to ignore it. Like you don't even care. Asaph is one psalmist who writes some things where he says, you know, Lord, I look around and I see evil people succeeding and I think God doesn't care. And those always come back to those people eventually saying, yeah, but you know what? God really does. And he really does understand.

### **Jeff Laird**

So yeah, when you read an expression that says, blessed is the person who takes your babies and smashes them against rocks, that's pretty pungent. That's, that's some pretty rough, rough stuff. But some of the context at least helps us understand where it's coming from. The verse right before that, that you read is the one that says, you know, talks about doing to you what you did to us. So this is not necessarily them just inventing something brand new. They're saying, this is something you did to us. And this person is sort of expressing, I would approve or applaud the person who did the same thing to you that you did to us.

### **Jeff Laird**

And obviously there's lots of other things we can talk about with Babylon and even in the imprecatory Psalms about the things that they're, that they're talking about and going after. But I think the biggest thing for us to keep in mind is that there is, there's a natural human response to these things. And if there's anything positive that we can see in what we catch in these Psalms and which ones are defined as imprecatory Psalms, there's a lot of argument about which ones are and are not, but even the ones that are, there's usually only a few phrases in them that they're always expressions of wanting to see something happen, particularly in the terms of God doing it.

### **Jeff Laird**

What we don't see in the imprecatory Psalms is somebody saying, I am going to go and do this. I am going to go and take revenge. I am going to do this and God is going to approve of it, or I am commanding this person to go and to do. It's this sort of emotional appealing thing where somebody says, I wish that this would happen. And in that sense, it also parallels the modern way we view things like karma. Again, karma is not real, but people often think of, I hope that person gets what they deserve. I hope that this thing happens to them or whatever. And sometimes that involves bad stuff. So this is another one of those where there is nothing about this that we look at and we say, this is good. I like this. This is okay. I don't have a problem with it. That's pretty rough. But we do understand that it's not a command. It's not an order. It's not even an appeal for somebody to do something themselves. It's really just people expressing this desire that God would do something because of this awful thing that's happened to them.

### **Kevin Stone**

And I think that's an important point that it is an expression of wanting God to make things right. And I think these imprecatory Psalms and these other passages in scripture that we see that contain imprecations, they're written in a time when it looked like God was doing nothing. Like the feeling behind some of these expressions, God, why aren't you acting? It really looks like this is the time to act in the book of Revelation. I think it's Revelation 6 where the souls under the altar are crying out to the Lord, how long, Lord, before you avenge our blood that was shed and the earth? We were killed unjustly. We were killed for righteousness sake. How long before you act on this?

### **Kevin Stone**

And the answer comes in the next verse where God gives them white robes and says, just a little longer and things will be taken care of. It's basically saying, God, this situation needs remedy. I cannot fix it. So, I'm coming to you

because you're the only one who can fix it. This is your business. Please see to it. Perform justice and save those who are being victimized.

### **Kevin Stone**

It's much like if there's a crime committed and we call the police and we report the crime. We say this crime occurred. We need justice here.

And I would like to see this case prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. There's nothing wrong with any of that. There's nothing wrong with seeking justice. There's nothing wrong with desiring to see a penalty within what the law allows. And that's, I think, what the psalmists are doing in these imprecatory psalms. They're calling the authority, the ultimate authority to press charges and seek justice within what the law allows.

### **Kevin Stone**

A couple of things we should probably just remember in general when we're thinking of the imprecatory psalms are, although God is merciful, and that's abundantly clear in Scripture, his mercy is there, his lovingkindness is there, but he is also a God of justice. He is a God who will make things right someday. He is holy and righteous in his judgments.

### **Kevin Stone**

And then another thing to remember is that the psalms were written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So, yes, we see human emotion. We see that the psalmists are coming from a certain point of view and they have certain experiences that are coloring their writing, but this is still under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And therefore, what is written is in harmony with God's will. This desire for justice is indeed something that God wills and God will make right someday. There's a difference between seeking vindication and being vindictive. And I think in these psalms that we're looking at today, including Psalm 137, the feeling is not one of vindictiveness, but it is one of vindication. Lord, please vindicate your children and make things right. We come to you because you are the authority. You're the one who has the right and the power to make all things right.

### **Shea Houdmann**

And I think that's the key point here, is that in these, whether it's in psalms or in the prophets' examples throughout Scripture, the right way to have this sort of desire is to, Lord, I want you to bring justice. I want you to be the one to decide how this person receives punishment. Psalm 137 is specifically, Lord, my desire is that this person, these people would be judged and have the same thing happen to them that they had to us. I think that that's a human reaction, but ultimately praying to God and desiring justice, like you said, Kevin, that's that's normal, that's good, that's right, that is in agreement with God's will, we should crave and desire judgment. Where, I don't know if the

right term is venting, or people in the Bible experience some truly horrible things at the hands of very evil people, and their natural reaction is, Lord, I want them to get a taste of their own medicine. I want them to reap what they sow. I want karma to come back and bite them. That whole mindset, ultimately, as followers of Christ, as believers in God, our heart's desire should be for justice.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So the desire for someone to be punished for their sins isn't necessarily wrong, but what that desire should lead us to is, one, to pray for God to bring the judgment that is right in His eyes, and then above that, I think Jesus sets a different example for us in terms of how we should view these. Yes, to crave, to desire justice, but in Matthew chapter 5, Jesus, in verses 38 to 39, says, you have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Here, Jesus is saying, all right, if this person pokes out my eye, I should be able to poke their eye out. Or if this person knocks out a tooth, I should be able to knock out a tooth. Jesus' response is, but I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil, but if anyone slaps you on the right hand, turn to him the other also. So Jesus here is setting a new standard. Yes, God is still a God of justice. God will still judge evil. People will reap what they sow. That is a scriptural principle.

### **Shea Houdmann**

But our desire, firsthand, should be for the people who commit evil acts to come to repentance, for them to experience salvation in Christ. So yes, pray for justice, but also pray for repentance. Pray that God would make things right, but also recognize, you know, if me experiencing suffering results in this person's life being transformed in Christ, I should receive that.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So there's, yes, as long as we are ultimately lifting the desire for justice to God, that is the right attitude. But there's also the human attitude. We are to be people of forgiveness. We are to be people who are willing to receive some pain if it will result in other people coming to faith in Christ. So there's a balance to this whole equation here. Difficult, yes. I mean, I've never experienced some of the evils that some of the people in the Bible had, so I'm in no sense questioning whether I would feel the same way that they did. But I think the Bible both presents desire for justice and the desire to seek repentance in those who committed the evil acts as things that we should want both of.

### **Jeff Laird**

It's good in a sense that the Bible records these things. One reason is because of just the lesson that it teaches us. As believers, we often experience emotions and feelings and things that are natural, they're normal. That's just the way we think. That's the way that our minds and our spirits process things. And those things are not necessarily good in and of themselves. Our first reaction, our first instinct, our deep feeling is not always where it's supposed to be. That's the reason that Scripture talks about people even like Paul saying, the things I want to do, I don't. The things I don't want to do, I do. Why is it like this? Thank God that Christ can save me from this. We have the book of Hebrews that talks about how Jesus knows what it means to be tempted, which is why when we go to him in prayer, we don't have to be afraid.

### **Jeff Laird**

In other words, I think part of what that means is we don't have to be in this position where we have to put on this false face about what we experience and what we think and what we feel. So when we see in the Psalms, and again, going back to people like Habakkuk, the first few verses of that, you have a prophet who's basically just looking at God and accusing him of being delinquent. That's not a good thing. It's not that the Bible applauds the idea of somebody looking at God and saying, you're not doing what you're supposed to do. But it does record that that is sometimes something that we have, and God is big enough to be able to take that and respond to it and say, here is what I'm doing that you don't understand. We have prophets like Jonah. The fact that Jonah is even in the Bible at all, I think is helpful in that same sense, because some of Jonah's reactions and responses and attitudes are terrible. So just because he's a prophet and just because he says and does those things doesn't make them right. Literally, the last thing we see from Jonah is him pouting because people come to faith instead of being destroyed.

### **Jeff Laird**

But the fact that those things are recorded are reminders that God understands who we are as human beings. So I don't think we have to read anything in these imprecatory verses and look at it and say, this is something that God thinks is a good expression. I don't think that God necessarily looks at what's written in Psalm 137:9 and says, yes, that's the way I want you to think. I want you to have that attitude. But it's a recorded expression of exactly where we are and exactly what we feel. And that's where the key part comes in, that where the Holy Spirit leads these is that we don't have people saying something like, I am going to go and do this.

### **Jeff Laird**

Maybe some of the people who wrote some of these Psalms at some point in time expressed that exact attitude. Maybe they said something like, I'm going to go and do this and I'm going to do that. Well, the Holy Spirit's not including that in what's recorded in scripture because that's not the attitude that we're supposed to engage in.

### **Jeff Laird**

So there's this idea we have to remember that the Bible records human beings exactly the way we are and exactly the way God understands us to be. And sometimes we're going to have those thoughts and we're going to have those feelings. And if we're bringing those things to God, anything we feel, it doesn't matter how hateful, how ridiculous, how stupid a thought is, the best thing we can do with anything we're thinking or dealing with is take it to God, express it very naturally, honestly, confidently. Here I am. I believe, help my unbelief is that sort of a thing. It's just, this is where I am. Lord, I wish that those people's kids would get smashed against rocks. That's terrible. But when we take that to God, that gives us an opportunity to have Him be the one who's responding. He's the one who is answering that, dealing with it, working with it, and hopefully working in us.

### **Jeff Laird**

So like you said, Shea, ultimately the goal that we're supposed to be moving towards is to have God's attitude where God says, I don't like it when wicked people suffer and die. I would rather that they be forgiven and come to faith. So when we express those things to God, that gives us that opening, that opportunity for Him to say, I understand where you're coming from now, but as long as you're expressing that to me, let me work on changing your attitude. Instead of you being so interested in revenge and hate, I can show you how what you're really supposed to be after is forgiveness. And we can't get that without Christ, which is why we want to bring those things to God instead of bottling them up until we do something stupid.

### **Shea Houdmann**

Kevin, I'm very interested in your perspective as a pastor. How do you counsel someone who is struggling with these sort of feelings? I think what Jeff said is exactly right, that these are honest expressions of how our people felt. The Bible presents very honest views of people. Every Bible hero, faults are presented about them, except for possibly Daniel and, of course, Jesus, of course. But the Bible presents real people having real feelings that we also all experience. So how do we... When something terrible has happened to them, and they're just lashing out, wanting God's, I want you to judge this person in exactly this way. How do we approach that in terms of actually counseling that

person and trying to understand, look, I understand why you feel the way you do, but what are we to say to someone who's in the midst of that?

**Kevin Stone**

Yeah, it's a very difficult situation, of course. And those feelings can be very strong, and they need to be dealt with. They need to be worked through. And so I tell people, when you pray, it is fine to vent. It is fine to just tell God exactly how you feel. He knows anyway. He knows what's in your heart. Go ahead and express that. The psalmists express all that's in their heart to God. You can do the same. God invites us to bring our burdens to Him because He cares for us. Now, when it comes to working through this tragedy, this injustice, then we take it to God, and then we do pray for repentance on the part of the person who was oppressing or who was committing the injustice. That should be our first goal, is, Lord, please save this person. Open this person's eyes. Bring him or her into your kingdom and cause them to see their need of a Savior, and may they turn to Christ.

**Kevin Stone**

Only God can see what is down the road and what's going to happen. And so, if this person never repents, then yes, we're going to face justice. We're going to face the judgment of God eventually, but only God can see that far. We, in our situation with our limited vision, we pray for repentance. We know that God is patient and that He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. So, that's what we're praying for. We're praying for repentance on the part of the wicked.

**Kevin Stone**

A good thing to keep in mind is that David wrote most of the imprecatory Psalms, and we know that David was not a vindictive person. How many times did he spare Saul's life? And then he shows grace to Shimei. He shows grace to Saul's family later, to Mephibosheth and all the rest. And so, David goes out of his way to be gracious to his enemies, but he's also the one who wrote most of the imprecatory Psalms. The enemies of David were also the enemies of God. And the enemies of God were prompted by Satan back in David's day in attempts to destroy David. In so doing, they would be destroying the son of David, who was going to come from his lineage someday. And when the enemies of David are trying to wipe out the nation of Israel, they're trying to wipe out the nation of God's choosing, again, to prevent the fulfillment of messianic prophecies. And over and over again, they try, over and over, they fail as God intervenes on behalf of his chosen people.

**Kevin Stone**

But in writing the imprecatory Psalms, the authors are seeking God's vindication on behalf of God, as much as they're seeking it to be vindicated on



their own. And so, they're seeking the will of God, and that will may indeed involve judgment, and definitely did back in the kingdom years, as David was king and those following him.

### **Kevin Stone**

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, and we pray, Thy kingdom come, there is an imprecation implied in that. Because when Jesus comes with his kingdom, the Bible's pretty clear he's going to be bringing judgment. Jesus brought grace the first time that he came into this world. When he comes a second time with the glory of heaven and the armies of heaven with him, he's going to be setting up his kingdom, and in so doing, putting down all other kingdoms. He's going to subdue his enemies. His enemies are going to become his footstool.

### **Kevin Stone**

And just read through the book of Revelation. You get to Revelation 19, you've got the sword that he's wielding. You've got the bloody battle there. He's treading the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God. He's got the robe dipped in blood. It's going to be a bloodbath when Jesus comes. When we pray, Thy kingdom come, that's kind of like an imprecatory prayer right there. We don't have a bloodlust where we're just thirsting for all of this violence, but we do want to see things made right someday in God's time, in God's way, and we are taught to pray to that end, knowing that God is patient. In the meantime, we tell the world of the means of salvation, and we leave the results of all that up to the Lord himself.

### **Shea Houdmann**

Yeah, Kevin, that's definitely a new way of looking at that line in the Lord's Prayer. I don't think I've ever really thought of it that way. I think when most people pray, Thy kingdom come, they're just like, no, I want heaven. I want eternity. Or they could even be saying, I want life in the millennial kingdom, which would be wonderful. But you've got to realize before that happens, there will be a significant amount of judgment. Revelation 19 is pretty gory in terms of the amount of violence and death and destruction that will take place when Christ returns. So yeah, Kevin, that's a powerful reminder.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So, imprecatory psalms, some of the other ones that are worth looking at. There's some debate, I think Jeff said earlier, about which psalms are actually considered imprecatory. Most would consider Psalm 5, 10, 17, 13, 58, 59, 69, 70, 79, 83, 109, 129, 137, which he talked about a lot today, and 140 as other imprecatory psalms. And I think it stands out to me in most of these, not all, but most, there's an imprecatory section where the person is praying, Lord, judge my enemies. Lord, bring justice on those who've committed these acts of evil.

Shea Houdmann

But almost all of them end with, whatever the case, I trust you. I love you, Lord. I will continue to worship you and follow you and submit myself to you, even if I don't understand what's going on. Even if I don't get to see this justice, I know your just. I'll continue to worship you in your temple. That sort of a mindset. I think ultimately that's something we can learn here, is that yes, we should desire justice. Yes, we should trust that God is going to judge acts of evil, and we should even desire to see those evil acts judged, but ultimately to leave it up to God, to trust him and his timing for when and how he brings about judgment.

**Shea Houdmann**

So the imprecatory psalms and other passages in the Bible, it presents a desire for people to be judged, for bad things to happen to people who've committed evil acts. It's a normal human reaction. I love what Kevin said in terms of us needing to feel free, welcome even, to approach the throne of grace in prayer and vent to God. He knows our hearts. He already knows what's going on. And if we're expressing that to him, it can be very healthy in terms of bringing healing, ultimately leading us to trust. So I think that is a good thing to do. But ultimately, he needs to come back to, Lord, whether you judge in the way I want you to or in the timing I want you to, I trust you. I know you are good and your ways are right.

**Jeff Laird**

And also as something to throw in there is that especially as believers in the new covenant, we need to remember that when we express those things, part of what we need to be expressing is not just, I just want to rant and rave about all the evil things that want to happen to this person. Somewhere in there, there needs to be that sense of us saying, Lord, I know I'm not supposed to be vengeance minded. There's a part of me that understands. And again, that's why I love that statement where the guy says, I believe, help my unbelief. I'm just expressing to you where I am, Lord. I'm not claiming that this is exactly where I'm supposed to wind up. I'm just telling you where I am. And I'm trusting that you are going to take care of this and you're going to bring it to where it needs to be.

**Jeff Laird**

So I don't think we should look at anything in the imprecatory Psalms and say, this means that it's good for us to pray specific bad things to happen to other people. I hope you step on a Lego. I hope you stub your toe, stuff like that. I don't think we should actually be praying those things. But if those things come to mind, I think it's okay for us to express those to God when we do it with the understanding that part of what I'm doing is I am just admitting my

weakness. I am just coming to God and saying, here's what I'm struggling with and where I am. And here's what I guess I would like to see happen. And Lord, I know you can help change my mind. Help me to be more interested in this person's redemption than I am with what I'm interested in right now, which is retaliation.

### **Kevin Stone**

We at our church, we memorize a passage of Scripture every month as a congregation. We memorize it together at the end of the month. We recite it all together. And I'm wondering now if maybe I should start looking at Psalm 137 or something, picking out some verses for that for our memory. I don't think that I'll go there. I'll probably just leave that for a deeper study than just doing that as a memory verse. But very interesting. John Piper called these passages the verses that we skipped, and there's a reason for it. But hopefully our discussion today has helped with bringing a little more clarity and thoughtfulness to these particular passages.

### **Shea Houdmann**

Absolutely. So Jeff, Kevin, thank you for joining me for this conversation. Continuing, this is definitely a difficult passage in the Bible in the sense that Psalm 137 verse 9 especially, it's like it's one thing to desire God to judge your enemies, but to judge them like that, wow. But as we talked about, honest expression of the pain you experience, the desire for justice ultimately needs to come back to trust. Lord, this is how I would do it and how I'm feeling right now, but above that, I trust you. I trust that you will judge rightly and judge in the right timing. And that's hopefully the attitude that we can come back to.

### **Shea Houdmann**

So I hope our conversation today has been helpful for you in understanding the imprecatory Psalms, and I hope you'll keep coming back for more episodes in our difficult passage of the Bible as there's several more coming through it. Just a quick reminder, in saying that these are difficult—difficult to interpret, difficult to understand—but don't question at all our view that the Bible is inerrant, Bible is perfect, that these things really happened, and that God is still true and just and right even when we can't always perfectly understand why he allows things he did. That's one comment we received recently. Are you saying that God is unjust or God isn't right. No, we are saying the exact opposite. We are saying that our hearts and attitudes are the ones that need corrected when we see something in scripture that doesn't seem to fit. These are difficult to explain in the sense that they represent real people dealing with really difficult situations and how they responded in the moment.

Ultimately as long as we come back to trust in God, that's the end we should aim for.

**Shea Houdmann**

So this has been the Got Questions podcast on what are the imprecatory psalms? And why would God have such things in scripture? And what are we to learn from this? Got questions? The Bible has answer and we'll help you find them.