

Psalm 137



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Welcome to the fifth and final part of our series on the Psalms. In the previous installments of our series, we've looked at a variety of different kinds of psalms to help us see the range of beautiful poems available to us that are waiting for our discovery in this beautiful collection of the Psalter, the 150 psalms in our Bible. Today we're going to look at yet another kind of psalm, and these kinds of psalms are sometimes referred to as psalms of vengeance. They seem to be angry, even violent, psalms, and for many Christians and Jews today, as we read the psalms or listen to them in our liturgies and services, we sometimes feel a bit uncomfortable with the sheer force of emotion that's being expressed.

Now, as it happens, I believe that all of the psalms have a genuine place in Jewish and Christian worship today in our own personal lives of faith and in the public worship of God's people. I don't have time to explain this fully. In fact, I have a student who is this moment and these months completing a PhD, a doctoral thesis on this entire subject area. But what I do want to do with you today is to actually read and explore Psalm 137. You may know it from popular music. [Singing.] You get the idea. I'm actually a terrible singer. I'm a much better preacher than I am a singer. But this psalm, which opens with the phrase, "By the rivers of Babylon," ends in this apparently horrendous, could we call it, curse. Let me read it to you: "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" And our blood curdles, and we don't know what to do with this psalm.

What I hope we can do in this session today is discover something of the ingenuity of the poet as he uses these provocative words to make us think more deeply about how we today—you and I—engage with the people we find difficult in our lives. Perhaps you and I have people who actually have made themselves our



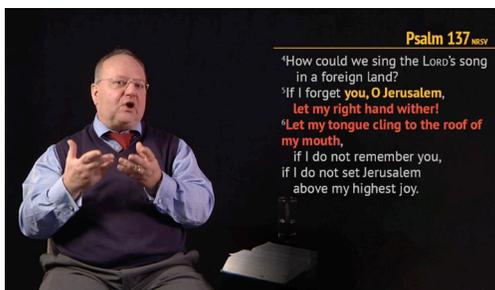
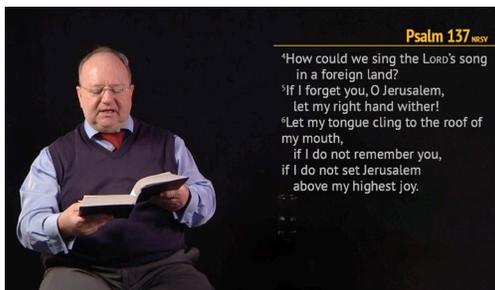
enemies, who truly want to destroy us, maybe physically, literally, or spiritually, and—how can I say it in an imaginative way—maybe just destroy our spirits, our hope, our integrity, our reputation, or whatever it may be.

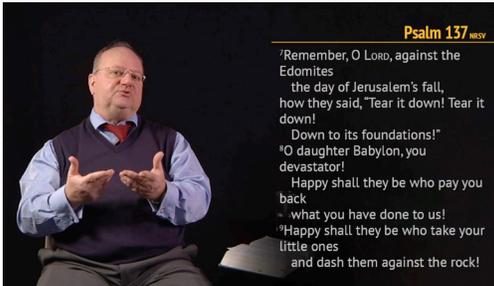
The poet here in this psalm is far from his home country by the rivers of Babylon. He is in exile. He's a victim of forced migration. He's a slave. He has to do as he's told. As we learn in the psalm, his captors and the people who are watching over him and his community are taunting him and other musicians like him to sing beautiful songs of Zion. These songs of Zion (for example, Psalms 48 and 50) are psalms that proclaim God's eternal providence over and watchfulness and protection for Jerusalem in the face of the reality that the psalmist and his community have actually been deported from Jerusalem after the Babylonians destroyed the city. This apparent invitation to have a party is not really an invitation to have a party at all, but it is a terribly humiliating taunt; and it is to this that the poet is responding.

What is happening in this psalm is that while in the first and opening verses the psalmist refuses to sing songs of Zion (songs of Jerusalem), he then, as it were, personifies his capital city, his home city, Jerusalem, and talks to the city. He says, "How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth." What the psalmist is doing is, there are two things happening at the same time. One, he's using a personification metaphor where the city of Jerusalem suddenly becomes a conversation partner—similar, by the way, to the personification of his soul in Psalm 103 that we looked at earlier in our series. In addition to using this personification metaphor, the psalmist is now cursing himself twice by saying, "If I stop singing about you, Jerusalem, may I have . . ." Obviously, he could be saying, "May I have a heart attack, and may I be not able to speak anymore, and may I not be able to use my hand to make music anymore."

While on the face of it, the psalmist is refusing to be humiliated in his inner world of faith and in the imagination, he continues to yearn for his home, Jerusalem, which is both a physical home for his body and a spiritual home for his soul.

As the psalmist continues, he resentfully reflects on what his enemies have done to him and to his community, and he envisages now Babylon, just like Jerusalem, as a personification. He talks to





Babylon, as it were, as if she was a woman, but this personification of the Babylonian Empire as a woman is not actually talking to a real woman. But what he's doing is he is talking to the people who are humiliating him, the people who are holding him captive. He's talking to an imaginary personification of the Babylonian military. When the psalmist speaks of the little ones of the Babylonian army, he is not speaking literally of infants, of toddlers, and of babies. He is speaking of soldiers; and so while this curse, this inverted curse—"Happy shall he be who is going to destroy you"—is still very much provocative and shockingly strong, it nonetheless is not really wishing that little babies, noncombatants, would be brutally killed. What the psalmist is hoping for is that, ultimately, it would be God who would intervene on his and his community's behalf and save them from their oppressors.

Now, I have left this particularly difficult and challenging psalm for the end of our series because I wanted you to see how important these new developments in the interpretation of the Bible are—and especially the interpretation of poetry are—for our understanding of the whole Word of God and all of the psalms together. When we truly are skilled in our reading—imaginatively and responsibly in our reading—then even psalms like Psalm 137 can become incredibly meaningful. It is still not an easy psalm, but it is a psalm that may even help you and me cope with our own suffering if we find ourselves at the receiving end of serious abuse. For the psalmist, this is a consequence of war; but you and I, we meet may have real enemies, people who wish us not well at all, people who abuse us, people who exploit us, people who try to destroy us and use us for their own means, who take away our dignity, who humiliate us, and who leave us crushed.

We can bring even this experience to the wonderful and amazing God of the psalms. We can pour out our own emotions of pain and of suffering and even of anger, resentment, and hatred, and not end up in brutal retaliation ourselves, but hand all of that over to the powerful and mighty and good God who is our good shepherd (as we explored in one of our earlier clips). This God hears us. He cares about us; and He will, indeed, hold our enemies accountable. We don't have to take vengeance into our own hands. Ultimately, God will act, and God will make it right.

This brings us to the end of our series, and I hope and trust that I have whetted your appetite to learn more about how to read the Bible, in particular, the Bible's poetry, for all it's worth. I hope that you are excited and motivated to learn more and that you will discover, in the psalms and the other poetry of the Bible, treasures that will transform your life, that will give you hope, that will help you in dark times, and that will inspire you to love God and bless God with everything that is within you. God bless you.