

PSALMS

Chapter 137

How Shall We Sing the LORD's Song?

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. 2 On the willows there we hung up our lyres. 3 For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" 4 How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! 6 Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy! 7 Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, "Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!" 8 O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! 9 Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

Ps 137 A plaintive song of the exile—of one who has recently returned from Babylon but in whose soul there lingers the bitter memory of the years in a foreign land and of the cruel events that led to that enforced stay. Here speaks the same deep love of Zion as that found in Ps 42–43; 46; 48; 84; 122; 126. The 12 poetic lines of the Hebrew song divide symmetrically into three stanzas of four lines each: the remembered sorrow and torment (vv. 1–3), an oath of total commitment to Jerusalem (vv. 4–6), a call for retribution on Edom and Babylon (vv. 7–9). (CSB)

A number of psalms use curses and express themselves so violently that modern readers find them shocking and even wonder how they could appear in the Sacred Scriptures. When the psalmist's emotions spill over into violence, it is important to understand why. (TLSB p. 879)

Christian should understand that the violent outbursts in these psalms are not prescriptions for the behavior of God's people but illustrations of emotion that God's people will indeed experience. Christians today who lose loved ones to war or to violent criminals will have these same feelings of anger and revenge. Praying the imprecatory psalms can help God's people express their anguish before God rather than act out their feelings in an unjust way. Imprecatory psalms prayed with psalms of repentance and hope can guide trouble hearts through the feelings they cannot escape. (TLSB – 879)

The curses contained in these psalms are often shocking to modern readers, but such prayers are in accordance with God's curse against sin. (PBC)

The Lutheran Study Bible lists the following psalms as imprecatory: 35; 55; 59; 79; 109; 137.

Some psalms include vivid curses which ask God to punish our enemies, as He protects and defends us from evil. In light of Jesus' teaching to love our enemies, these prayers may seem improper and un-Christian. However, in each one the psalmist cries out for God to take revenge. The imprecatory psalms put the psalmist squarely on the side of God who hates injustice and who does indeed rescue His abused children. While we leave vengeance to the Lord, and while we yearn for the ungodly to turn from sin to the Savior, we still hate wickedness and evil. Ultimately, Satan instigates all injustice, and the imprecatory psalms find their true target as we pray them against the kingdom of darkness. (LL)

No section of the Psalter causes us greater difficulty today than the so-called imprecatory psalms. With shocking frequency their thoughts penetrate the entire Psalter (5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 16, 21, 23, 28, 31, 35, 36, 40, 41, 44, 52, 54, 55, 58, 59, 68, 69, 70, 71, 137, and others). Every attempt to pray these psalms seems doomed to failure. They seem to be an example of what people think of as the religious first stage toward the NT. Christ on the cross prays for his enemies and teaches us to do the same. How can we still, with these Psalms, call for the wrath of God against our enemies? The question is therefore: Can the imprecatory psalms be understood as God's word for us and as the prayer of Jesus Christ? Can the Christian pray these psalms? Note carefully again that we do not ask about possible motives, which we can never fathom anyway, but rather about the content of the prayer. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

The enemies referred to here are enemies of the cause of God, who lays hands on us for the sake of God. It is therefore nowhere a matter of personal conflict. Nowhere does the one who prays these psalms want to take revenge into his own hands. He calls for the wrath of God alone (cf. Romans 12:19). Therefore he must dismiss from his own mind all thought of personal revenge; he must be free from his own thirst for revenge. Otherwise, the vengeance would not be seriously commanded from God. This means that only the one who is himself innocent in relation to his enemy can leave the vengeance to God. The prayer for the vengeance of God is the prayer for the execution of his righteousness in the judgment of sin. This judgment must be made public if God is to stand by his word. It must also be promulgated among those whom it concerns. I myself, with my sin, belong under this judgment. I have no right to want to hinder this judgment. It must be fulfilled for God's sake and it has been fulfilled, certainly, in wonderful ways. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

God's vengeance did not strike the sinners, but the one sinless man who stood in the sinner's place, namely God's own Son. Jesus Christ bore the wrath of God, for the execution of which the psalm prays. He stilled God's wrath toward sin and prayed in the hour of the execution of the divine judgment: "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they do!" No other than he, who himself bore the wrath of God, could pray in this way. That was the end of all phony thoughts about the love of God which do not take sin seriously. God hates and redirects his enemies to the only righteous one, and this one asks forgiveness for them. Only in the cross of Jesus Christ is the love of God to be found. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Thus the imprecatory psalm leads to the cross of Jesus and to the love of God which forgives enemies. I cannot forgive the enemies of God out of my own resources. Only the crucified Christ can do that, and I through him. Thus to carrying out of vengeance becomes grace for all men in Jesus Christ. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Certainly it is important to distinguish in relation to these psalms whether I stand in the time of promise or in the time of fulfillment, but this distinction is true for all psalms. I pray the imprecatory psalms in the certainty of their marvelous fulfillment. I leave the vengeance to God and ask him to execute his righteousness to all his enemies, knowing that God has remained true to himself and has himself secured justice in his wrathful judgment on the cross, and that this wrath has become grace and joy for us. Jesus Christ himself requests the execution of the wrath of God on his body, and thus he leads me back daily to the gravity and the grace of his cross for me and all enemies of God. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Even today I can believe the love of God and forgive my enemies only by going back to the cross of Christ, to the carrying out of the wrath of God. (*We need to remember that Bonhoeffer was being persecuted by the Nazi's.*) The cross of Jesus is valid for all men. Whoever opposes him, whoever corrupts the word of the cross of Jesus on which God's wrath must be executed, must bear the cruse of God some or another. The NT speaks with great clarity concerning this and does not distinguish itself at all in this respect from the OT, but it also speaks of the joy of the church in that day on which the God will execute his final judgment (Gal. 1:8f; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 18; 19; 20:11). In this way the crucified Jesus teaches us to pray the imprecatory psalms correctly. (Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible – Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

Psalm 137 – Generation after generation, God's unfaithful people practiced idolatry. They refused to heed the warning of God's prophets, choosing instead to conform to the dominant cultures of the pagan world, including infant sacrifice. At last, God's people experienced His judgment. In the Babylonian captivity, God's people mourned for their sin and its consequences. They learned to cling to God's promises of deliverance in His Word as delivered by the prophets. (TLSB)

The 137th psalm is a psalm of prayer in the person of captives in Babylon. It is a prayer for Jerusalem, that is, for God's Word and spiritual rule that lay completely destroyed; for thus it was assumed (with great reason) especially by those who fear God, as this psalm shows. Although Babylon and Edom greatly rejoiced at this destruction and mocked those who lamented it, yet they should not thereby escape, unrepentant and blameless, but rather shall be torn to pieces in return. Their children also shall be dashed on the rocks, and they shall have no descendants. This indeed happened to Babylon and shall also happen to our Edomites and Babylonians of today, who rejoice, mocking both the poor Church, torn to pieces, and the destruction of God's Word and worship. But for all that, Israel and God's Word shall remain forever and ever. (Reading the Psalms with Luther)

This psalm explicitly links these three transitional psalms and the songs of ascents to the celebration of the return from Babylon. (PBC)

137:1 waters. The Tigris and Euphrates and the many canals associated with them. (CSB)

The exiles, who either live by the rivers and canals of Babylon or gather there to mourn, are weeping at the memories of what they have lost. (TLSB)

we sat. Again and again the thought of their forced separation from Zion brought them down to the posture of mourning (see Job 2:8, 13; La 2:10). (CSB)

137:2 we hung up our lyres. “The joyful harp is silent” (Isa 24:8) because the callous Babylonians demanded exotic entertainment with the joyful songs of distant Zion, while the exiles' instruments were only “tuned to mourning” (Job 30:31). (CSB)

In no mood to sing, the exiles hung their musical instruments in the trees beside the water. (TLSB)

This psalm is a sad counterpart to the many psalms which speak of the joy Israel experienced during the festivals at God's house in Jerusalem. (PBC)

137:3 *captors...required of us songs* – Babylonian victors mock the exiles, forcing them to sing the joyous songs of the temple—such as the preceding psalms—while they are in abject defeat. (TLSB)

137:4–6 Only he whose heart had disowned the Lord and his holy city Jerusalem could play the puppet on a Babylonian stage. But may I never play the harp again or sing another syllable if I am untrue to that beloved city! (CSB)

The psalmist describes the grief of the exiles as they sat along the rivers and canals of Babylon and the surrounding territory. When the Babylonians asked them to perform the happy songs of Zion, it may have been done in tactless ignorance or in sarcastic mockery of Israel's faith. In either case the grief Israel suffered was just as intense, because the mere singing of the songs of Zion would remind the exiles of the joys they were missing by being torn away from Jerusalem. (PBC)

137:4 *the Lord's songs* – Answer to captors' requests in v 3. How can the people sing the songs of the temple worship in Jerusalem when both the temple and Jerusalem have been destroyed? (TLSB)

137:5-6 In the next two verses we have a shift from lament to confidence and hope. (A Commentary on the Psalms – Ross)

137:5 Though Jerusalem is gone, its people can, at least, remember all that it meant. (TLSB)

right hand forget its skill – Unable to play the lyre, which was used for healing troubled spirits (cf 1Sm 16:23). (TLSB)

137:6 *tongue stick to the roof of mt mouth* – Let my mouth be unable to sing. (TLSB)

137:7–9 Lord, remember Edom; and as for you, Babylon, I bless whoever does to you what you did to Jerusalem: a passionate call for redress from a loyal son of the ravaged city. (CSB)

It is important to remember that the curses of this psalm are not originally the psalmist's curses. They are the Lord's curses which the psalmist has made his own. The destruction of Edom was the fulfillment of prophecy, particularly the prophecy of Obadiah. The destructions of Edom and Babylon were both fore-shadowings of judgment day. (PBC)

137:7 *Edomites*. The age-long animosity of Edom—descendants of Esau, Jacob's brother—showed its most dastardly face in Jerusalem's darkest hour. No doubt the author knew the Lord's judgments against that nation announced by the prophets (Isa 63:1–4; Jer 49:7–22; Eze 25:8, 12–14; 35; Obadiah). (CSB)

Judah's neighbors and kinsmen, the people of Edom, went over to the Babylonian side and rejoiced in the destruction of Jerusalem (cf Ob). (TLSB)

day of Jerusalem – When the holy city was destroyed. (TLSB)

lay it bare. Lit. "Strip her"—cities were conventionally portrayed as women. La 4:21 anticipates that Edom will be punished by suffering the same humiliation. (CSB)

137:8 *Daughter*. A personification of Babylon and its inhabitants. (CSB)

doomed to be destroyed. The author may have known the Lord's announced judgments on this cruel destroyer (Isa 13; 21:1–10; 47; Jer 50–51; Hab 2:4–20). (CSB)

God had promised to bring judgment on the tormentors, the mighty empire of Babylon (Is 13; 47). (TLSB)

The Babylonians fall under God's curse because of their haughty attitude, their cruelty and their mockery of the Lord's worship. (PBC)

blessed shall he be who repays you – What the Babylonians did to the people of Jerusalem, including the killing of children, will be done to Babylon (Is 47:6–9). The text is not clear whether “he” refers to God or to a nation He chooses to administer judgment. (TLSB)

137:9 *your little ones.* War was as cruel then as now; women and children were not spared (see 2Ki 8:12; 15:16; Isa 13:16, 18; Hos 10:14; 13:16; Am 1:13; Na 3:10). For the final announcement of the destruction of the “Babylon” that persists in its warfare against the City of God, and the joy with which that announcement is greeted, see Rev 18:1–19:4. (CSB)

Bitter passage is a horrific expression of the psalmist's craving for unrepentant Babylon to be utterly annihilated, with no new generation possible to restore its power. That the conquering Medes would do this to Babylonian infants is specifically prophesied in Is 13:16. (TLSB)

As horrible as the practices of ancient warfare were, modern readers should not be too smug in dismissing such practices as relics of a pre-scientific, un-enlightened age. The horrors produced by sinful man are no less terrible in our era when warring nations routinely bomb civilian populations from a distance. (PBC)

Ps 137 By abandoning God for false religions and the evil ways of the surrounding cultures, the people lost everything. Now, in their exile, they appreciate what they threw away. We, too, are exiles in the new Babylon—the world system with its abominations and its beast (Rv 18)—and must endure its temptations and tribulations. We, too, know that sin brings regret, grief, self-loathing, and bitterness. (Such emotions are signs of repentance.) Yet we can also look for our deliverance, clinging to God's promises of redemption delivered by one wholly innocent, Jesus, God's own Child. • O Lord, as we, too, are exiles in this ungodly world, teach us to mourn for our sins. Give us the gift of repentance, so that we may escape the judgment we deserve. Deliver us from our captivity to sin, through Your Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.