

Down But Not Out!

Psalm 137

Introduction. Psalm 137:9 is one of the most difficult verses in all of the Bible to read and understand. It sounds so unchristian and foreign to the spirit of Jesus who told us to love our enemies and to pray for them (Matt 5:44). And yet there it is, plain as day: “happy is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks.” What are we supposed to do with this? How do we make sense of it?

In a psalm composed of lament (vs. 1-4) and commitment (vs.5-6), Psalm 137 ends in what is called a psalm (or at least a stanza) of imprecation. Psalms where God’s people call on God to bring devastating judgment on their enemies are not rare. Pastor Sam Storm lists the following that could legitimately fall under the category of “imprecatory Psalms”: Pss. 5:10; 6:10; 7:6; 9:19-20; 10:2,15; 17:13; 28:4; 31:17-18; 35:1,4-8,19,24-26; 40:14-15; 41:10; 54:5; 55:9,15; 56:7; 58:6-10; 59:5,11-14; 63:9-10; 68:1-2; 69:22-28; 70:2-3; 71:13; 79:6,10-12; 83:9-18 (cf. Judges 4:15-21; 5:25-27); 94:1-4; 97:7; 104:35; 109:6-19,29; 119:84; 129:5-7; 137:7-9; 139:19-22; 140:8-11; 141:10; 143:12)

(“Ten Things You Should Know About The Imprecatory Psalms”, Crosswalk.com).

Furthermore, we must recognize that words of imprecation are not found only in Old Testament Scripture. They are found in texts like Luke 10:10-16; 1 Corinthians 16:21-22; Galatians 1:8; 5:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-10; 2 Timothy 4:14; Revelation 6:10; 19:1-2). Even our Lord Jesus used imprecatory language in Matthew 23 (cf. also His use of Psalm 41:8-10 in Matt 26:23-24). And, Peter cites the imprecations of Psalm 69 and 109 in reference to Judas in Acts 1:20 (Storm, Ibid). The fact that the psalms use poetic and emotive language expressing the heart-felt feelings of the writer offers some help, but still I believe we need something more to make sense of all of this in light of our view of the Bible as inspired, inerrant and infallible. Again I turn to my brother and friend Sam Storms whose ten principles on imprecatory psalms have been of immense help to me personally.

- 1) What we read in these OT Psalms are not emotionally uncontrolled outbursts by otherwise sane and compassionate people. . . . [They] are the product of reasoned meditation (not to mention divine inspiration!).
- 2) We should remember that in Deuteronomy 27-28 the Levites pronounce imprecations against Israel if she proves unfaithful to the covenant. Israel, in accepting the law, brought herself under its sanctions. She in essence pronounced curses upon herself should she break the covenant, and God looked on their response with favor.
- 3) These prayers are not expressions of personal vengeance. . . . There is a vast difference between vindication and vindictiveness. David's passion was for the triumph of divine justice, not the satisfaction of personal malice. The OT was as much opposed to seeking personal vengeance against one's personal enemies as is the NT (see Exod. 23:4-5; Lev. 19:17-18).

- 4) We also must remember that imprecations are nothing more than human prayers based on divine promises. One is simply asking God to do what he has already said he will do.
- 5) Imprecations are expressions provoked by the horror of sin.
[Writers] prayed this way because of [their] deep sensitivity to the ugliness of evil. . . . It is frightening to think that we can stand in the presence of evil and not be moved to pray as [authors of Scripture] did.
- 6) The motivation behind such prayers is zeal for God's righteousness, God's honor, God's reputation, and the triumph of God's kingdom. Is our willingness to ignore blasphemy and overlook evil due to a deficiency in our love for God and his name?
- 7) Another factor to keep in mind is that David [in particular], being king, was God's representative on earth. Thus, an attack on David was, in effect, an attack on God.

- 8) The prayers of imprecation are rarely, if ever, for the destruction of a specific individual but almost always of a class or group, namely, “the wicked” or “those who oppose [God]”.
- 9) We must keep in mind that in most instances these prayers for divine judgment come only after extended efforts on the part of the psalmist to call the enemies of God to repentance. These are not cases of a momentary resistance to God but of unrepentant, recalcitrant, incessant, hardened and haughty defiance of him.
- 10) David knows that he needs spiritual protection lest he “hate” God’s enemies for personal reasons. That is why he concludes Psalm 139 with the prayer that God purify his motives and protect his heart. . . .Therefore, when David speaks of “hatred” for those who oppose God’s kingdom he is neither malicious nor bitter nor vindictive, nor moved by self-centered resentment. But he most certainly is jealous for God’s name and firmly at odds with those who blaspheme. (Storms, Ten Things...)

As we already noted, Psalm 137 is a composite of lament (1-4), commitment (5-6) and imprecation (7-9). It also is one of the easiest psalms to date being clearly written during the Babylonian exile. Its history is far removed from us, but the expressions of pain and sorrow are as fresh and real as today. What can Christians learn from their ancient forefathers when agony and tragedy has virtually overwhelmed us?

I. There is a time for the Lord's people to mourn 137:1-4

Judah had been invaded and conquered by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians, finally falling in 586 B.C. The city and temple were destroyed and many of the brightest and best were taken in exile to Babylon. Most of those exiled would never see their much loved homeland ever again. Heartbreak and despair overwhelmed them like a flood. At such a time mourning was an appropriate and maybe the only response.

1) We mourn when we experience loss 137:1

The psalmist is “by the river of Babylon,” the Tigris or Euphrates.

Walking or resting beside a river is usually relaxing and refreshing, but not for this song-writer. Here he, along with others (“we”) “sat down and wept when they remembered Zion.” Reflecting on what once was and now was lost, they cried in despair and sorrow. Thinking about Zion or Jerusalem (mentioned 5 times in the psalm), about home, brought these Hebrew exiles to tears and mourning. And, it should. The sins of Judah against God and one another brought God’s just judgment on His people. It hurt. The pain and sense of loss was almost unbearable. But, if the discipline of the Lord brought them to repentance, it would be worth it. Hebrews 12:10 reminds us, “but [the Lord] disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.”

2) We mourn when taunted by the wicked 137:2-4

These song writers and singers continue their mourning and lament. They hang up their lyres, their harps, on the poplar (ESV, “willows”) trees (v.2). There would be no singing today, maybe never again. But, things become worse. Their captors, the Babylonians, begin to harass

and taunt them. Sing us a song they say (v.3). With glee and sarcasm they pour salt in their wound and shout, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion” (v.3). Alan Ross pinpoints their mocking and lack of sincerity in their taunt, “[they] were not interested in hearing their songs. They were simply mocking the Jews by demanding that they sing one of their victory songs. It is as if they were saying, ‘Where is your God now?’” (*Psalms*, vol.3, 790). These Jewish exiles are no doubt hurt and embarrassed by these taunts, but they will not be manipulated by their oppressors. “How can we sing the Lord’s song on foreign soil” (v.4) means there will be no singing today by this choir. We are not here for your amusement and frivolity! We are here because we dishonored and disobeyed our Lord. Sinful people should not be singing a song of celebration and victory! Maybe someday, but not today. We rightly mourn over our sin, but our hope is still in the Lord as the following verses make clear.

II. There is a time for the Lord’s people to renew their faith 137:5-6

Despair need not lead to defeat. Being down does not mean you are out! Renewal and restoration and reviving are always in the realm of possibility with our God. Remember what God has done in the past. He can do it again in the future. It is instructive to note that just 70 years after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., Babylon, the greatest empire the world had known up to that time, would fall (516 B.C.) never to rise again. The Jews, on the other hand, would begin to make their way back home to Jerusalem. We renew our faith today and watch our God begin to respond if not today, then tomorrow. What is essential to renewal?

1) Remember what God has done 137:5

Willem VanGemeren says 1 Kings 8:48-49 could be in the minds of these exiles as they penned these words. (*Psalms*, vol. 3 EBC, 951). That is certainly a possibility. In 1 Kings 8:47-53 we read words that are so appropriate to the Jews' plight in Babylon. There we read,

“and when they come to their senses
in the land where they were deported
and repent and petition you in their captors' land:
“We have sinned and done wrong;

we have been wicked,”
and when they return to you with all their heart and all their soul
in the land of their enemies who took them captive,
and when they pray to you in the direction of their land
that you gave their ancestors,
the city you have chosen,
and the temple I have built for your name,
may you hear in heaven, your dwelling place,
their prayer and petition and uphold their cause.
May you forgive your people
who sinned against you
and all their rebellions against you,
and may you grant them compassion
before their captors,
so that they may treat them compassionately.
For they are your people and your inheritance;
you brought them out of Egypt,
out of the middle of an iron furnace.
May your eyes be open to your servant’s petition
and to the petition of your people Israel,
listening to them whenever they call to you.
For you, Lord GOD, have set them apart as your inheritance
from all peoples of the earth,
as you spoke through your servant Moses

when you brought our ancestors out of Egypt.”

These Hebrew exiles commit, better, recommit themselves to God in striking and picturesque language. If we forgot our home, our God and all He gave us, “may our right hand forget its skill.” Let it become paralyzed and lose its usefulness could be in the psalmist’s mind. Or, perhaps the idea is related to his skill in playing the harp (Craig Broyles, *Psalms*, NIBC, 479). In either case his affirmation is strong. Better to lose something physically valuable than forget my God and His holy city Jerusalem. Exile will not result in spiritual amnesia! How interesting it is, in this context, that Psalm 137 is sandwiched between Psalm 136 and Psalm 138.

2) Rejoice in where God dwells 137:7

Verse 7 clearly parallels in through verse 6. Forget my God? Better to lose the use of my hand (v.6) and the use of my tongue (v.7). Better to lose the skill to play the harp and the tongue to sing (things that would especially devastate a musician), “if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem as my greatest joy!” Charles Spurgeon writes, “the

singers imprecate silence upon their mouths if they forget Jerusalem to gratify Babylon (TOD, vol.3 228). Today we might say I would rather lose an arm or a leg than walk away from my God! I would rather die than betray him! This world and this life is not “my greatest joy.” God is! His kingdom is! Like father Abraham, we are “looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10). The Hebrews of old did not want to lose sight of old Jerusalem. Those in Christ do not want to lose sight of New Jerusalem (Rev. 21-22)! That is where our God will dwell for all eternity. This is where we should long to be.

III. There is a time for the Lord’s people to commit final judgment to God 137:7-9

Verses 7-9 contain the imprecatory portion of this psalm. Two enemies of the people of God are in the crosshairs of the song writer: 1) the Edomites (v.7) and the Babylonians (vv.8-9). Both brought pain and sorrow to the Hebrews. Both dealt with Judah in a ruthless manner. God is both merciful and just. It is time for His justice.

1) Commit to God those who want your total destruction 137:7

The psalmist asks God to “remember what the Edomites said that day at Jerusalem.” Ross notes, “According to the biblical records, the Edomites had sided with the Babylonians against Judah and had taken great pleasure in the destruction of Zion (see Obadiah, Lam 4:21; and Ezek. 25:12f, 35:5f). They had shouted for the Babylonians to tear the city down to its foundations” (Ross, 792). We see this reflected in our text, “Destroy it! Destroy it down to its foundations.” Destroy it literally? Absolutely! Destroy the social, spiritual and cultural foundations of the Jewish nation? You bet! They wanted the total destruction of Jerusalem and all it represents. The fact the Edomites were closely related to the Jews only accentuated their treachery. The exiled Jews want justice, but they will leave that in the hands of the LORD.

2) Commit to God those who have treated you with great evil 137:8-9

The Psalmist now turns his attention to “Daughter Babylon” (a poetic expression for Babylon). No one had ever, to that point in history, treated Israel with such destruction and slaughter. But they, just like

Judah and Israel, would have their day of judgment (for example see Isa 13:16; Hab 1). They are “doomed to destruction” according to the word of the Lord. “Happy” (*ESV*, “blessed”) is the one who pays you back what you have done to us” (v.8). “Happy” (*ESV*, “Blessed”) is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks.” Strong language. Striking language. Startling language that challenges our modern sensibilities. Was this, perhaps in part, to prevent future retaliation? Was it some type of judgment that God would bring that matched what Babylon had done to Jerusalem? Those of us who have never experienced such pogroms and holocaust should not be too quick to judge. Like the writer of Psalm 137, we will commit the whole matter to God. This is not personal revenge. This is a national prayer for God to punish the heartless and ruthless enemy of God’s people. We will trust Deuteronomy 32:35 and Romans 12:19. Vengeance belongs to the Lord. He will repay.

Conclusion: Babylon was such an evil and wicked empire it became symbolic of the godless kingdoms of this world that stand in unrepentant

and steadfast opposition to God. Revelation 18-19 makes this crystal clear. That is why when our gracious Savior, the Lord Jesus comes again, he will judge this “notorious prostitute” and he will “avenge the blood of his servants that was on her hands.” And on that day, “her smoke will ascend forever and ever’ as a sign of God’s just and righteous judgment (Rev 18:2-3). Our Lord is a merciful Savior. He is also a righteous judge. My prayer is you will know Him as the former and not the latter.