

## 10) PRAYING ANGER (PSALM 137)

### INTRODUCTION

The cry for retributive justice, is a cry for atonement or vengeance. Some of the psalms in the Psalter are known as “imprecatory” – prayer/invocation for evil to befall the psalmist’s enemies.

Jesus declared that we are to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. But psalms such as 58, particularly vs.10-11, imagine the righteous rejoicing “when they see vengeance done; they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked. People will say, ‘Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely there is a God who judges on earth.’”

Psalm 137 is the clearest example of this kind of psalm. But can it fit into the practice and theology of Christian prayer in the same way as can prayers for reconciliation, forgiveness and world peace?

### A PSALM IN THREE PARTS

1) 1-4 The historical setting of the psalm is clearly indicated. There is reference to the exile of Jews by the Babylonians. In 587 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon destroyed Jerusalem and took the best and brightest into captivity (Daniel and his friends are an example). In v.1 there is a remembering of Zion (Jerusalem) and weeping.

a) The past tense indicates that the psalm was actually compiled after the exile when the people of Judah returned to their land (after 539 BC), when King Cyrus of Persia conquered the Babylonians. The experience, however, is still fresh, as are the wounds of their loss.

b) The “we” are probably Levites – temple musicians and priests, who have more formal ties to Jerusalem. “Hanging up their harps” (1 Samuel 16: 14-23) is a form of lamentation, for they cannot sing when they are so sad. They are the particular targets of captors who ask them to sing “songs of Zion.”

c) There are many psalms of praise in the Psalter, but also a group of psalms labeled “Zion songs” – 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122. They express praise for the beauty of Zion, the temple and God’s dwelling being there in a special way. Ps. 84:10, for instance, declares that “a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness.” Psalm 48 also declares that Zion is invincible. Thus, the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile really shook the faithful. This only adds to the wounds. They came back to see the city and the temple in ruins. 84:6 also speaks of remembering, and this implies that the ruins still remain even when people have come back. Without modern technology, rebuilding would take a long time.

Vs.4 states: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" Behind this question lies the taunts of captors – Your God is powerless! Your God is absent! Your faith is silenced, for you have nothing to sing about! The big question is: how are the faithful to understand the exile? Is God, indeed, powerless before Babylonian gods? Or, is the exile Israel's punishment for lack of faithfulness? And are foreigners the means of God's chastisement? (Isaiah 10: 5-19 suggests this view) It's not about how "strong" our faith is. Any faith built on our own efforts to hold up will topple under the wrong circumstances. Rather, it is about "waiting on God" for understanding, the discernment of the way through, and a strength not our own to discover new life.

2) 5-6 "Forget" and "remember" are key terms.

a) The "I" is speaking for all the faithful. Remembering is critical, otherwise all is lost. If we forget, let us be accursed. If my tongue "clings" to the roof of my mouth and my right hand (with which I play) withers, then my very vocation and gift of music is lost. Clearly, the psalmist recognizes that unless his gift is a dedication and allegiance to God, he does not deserve to have it. Unless his priorities and principles are right, all his gifts, achievements and talents are useless. They are given him for a purpose, to praise and glorify God.

b) These verses also reflect a righteous anger. Only those grounded in Israel's faith and devoted to the God residing in the temple, can appreciate the tragedy and loss of Jerusalem. Nothing can be more devastating or evil. It's not just a personal loss, but a loss for a whole nation and for the whole world.

Are there acts of evil of such magnitude as to produce a righteous anger that should not ebb too quickly? Indeed, sometimes to forgive too quickly would be to forget the precious thing that has been lost. The dilemma for the psalmist is that to express any easy forgiveness for the Babylonians would be equivalent to wiping Jerusalem from his mind. Is remembering and not forgetting, though, equivalent to not forgiving? How do we bring our love for precious things lost and our forgiveness of those who have caused the loss, together?

3) 7-9 These verses are a prayer. "Remember" or do not forget. The particular focus of the psalmist are the Edomites, partners of the Babylonians in the downfall of Jerusalem. Vs. 8-9 point to the Babylonians as the culprits behind it all. When God's justice is meted out, surely Edom and Babylon will get their due. "Happy" or "Blessed" are words that express beatitudes. But can hateful or vengeful sentiments be considered beatitudes?

In prophetic oracles against the nations, Edom and Babylon are a frequent focus (Isaiah 34: 1-17, 47: 1-15, Jeremiah 45: 7-22, Ezekiel 35: 1-15, Obadiah). But v. 9 of this psalm is, perhaps, the most shocking of all. Sometimes in military campaigns when the goal was to wipe out a whole population, children were slaughtered as well as adults. But how can one find blessing or fulfillment in the killing of innocent and vulnerable persons? For the psalmist, clearly, the world is not acceptable without Jerusalem.

## CONCLUSION

Is Psalm 137, finally, a cry for vengeance or a memorial for Zion?

1) The psalm represents a tenacious faith that will not forget, that will remain loyal and true to its first and only love.

2) The psalmist doesn't take matters into his own hands, but asks God to reap vengeance. He expresses what is in his heart honestly to God. Perhaps, this is a necessary first step to liberation from the anger and hatred.

3) Psalm 137 is placed between 136 and 138 which are both focused on praise to God with a refrain in both: "God's steadfast love endures forever." When the waters of Babylon meet our lives; when we sit and weep, when we feel torment and anger, when we remember what we have lost and cry out for justice, even then, though by our eyes unseen, God's love surrounds us. Can it be that this psalm is part of a journey toward healing and wholeness? From paralysis and hopelessness, to the expression of anger and hate, where energy is harnessed, to weeping and mourning and letting go, to a constructive release of bad energy and a re-channeling of energy for hope of rebuilding our lives and our world – this may be, finally, the journey of which Psalm 137 is an important part.