



World Christian Fellowship

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Psalms 137

Finding God in Foreign Land!

Psalms 137:1-9, *By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down, yea, we wept When we remembered Zion. ²We hung our harps Upon the willows in the midst of it. ³For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, And those who plundered us requested mirth, Saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" ⁴How shall we sing the Lord's song In a foreign land? ⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget its skill! ⁶If I do not remember you, Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth— If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy. ⁷Remember, O Lord, against the sons of Edom The day of Jerusalem, Who said, "Raze it, raze it, To its very foundation!" ⁸O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed, Happy the one who repays you as you have served us! ⁹Happy the one who takes and dashes Your little ones against the rock!*

Psalms are the key to our everyday life.

Very rarely you have heard this Psalms preached.

Very difficult to comprehend verse 9 from our view point and that too attribute with Godly people.

Background:

Israel went into Captivity 722 B.C.

Judah was captured by Nebuchadnezzar in 605, 596 and 587.B.C.

More than 20,000 people were taken as captive.

The fall of Jerusalem had deep ramifications, since it was much more than the capital city; it was the dwelling place of God.

Most scholars agree the psalmist was most likely a Levite, and that he wrote this communal psalm in response to the captors constant taunting of the Israelites while in captivity, essentially provoking the enslaved Israelites to answer in song, “Where is your God now?”

This Psalm is known as Imprecatory Psalms meaning invoke evil upon or curse upon someone.

V 1-3 provide the setting of the lament.

V 4 illustrates the central words of lament.

V 5-6 declares an oath in answer to the lament.

V 7-9 issue imprecatory words in answer to the lament.

How do we explain the imprecatory psalms?

There are three approaches we must take to understand the imprecatory psalms.

1. God's purposes
2. The Psalmist's attitude
3. The New Testament revelation.

1. God's purpose.

There are three broad purposes of God which, when understood, help us to see why the psalmist would invoke God to call down such awful judgments:

a) God to punish wicked and reward righteous.

God is righteous and just.

Indeed, He would not be God at all if He were not.

Since God has revealed Himself to His creation as righteous and just, it is necessary that He punish sin and reward righteousness.

If men could commit horrible crimes and never pay or if nations were allowed to perpetrate atrocities and never be called to account, we could rightly conclude that there is no righteous God in heaven.

There comes a point at which not to judge sin would be to tolerate it. So, God must judge sin.

God does this in two ways.

First, There will be a future judgment on all nations and on every person. This period in the Bible is called “the day of the Lord.” God’s Word is abundantly clear on this point (**2 Thessalonians 1:6-9**).

Even though sinners seem to prosper now, a day of judgment is coming. None outside of Christ will escape His wrath. Every sinner must stand before the bar of God’s justice.

Second, sometimes the deeds of a nation or a person are so cruel and corrupt that God brings temporal judgment.

To allow certain atrocities to go unpunished would violate the moral fibre of the universe and encourage other evil people to perpetrate similar evils.

In such cases, the temporal judgment is not the final judgment, but it brings the evil reign to its end on earth.

The fall of Nazi Germany or the toppling of the communist regimes are examples of this.

The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 on account of their rejection of Jesus as Messiah is another example.

The psalmist is a man who identifies with God's righteous purpose to judge all evil.

So, he cries out for God to act.

b) God uses His chosen to bless the people.

God's plan is to bless all families on the earth through Abraham's seed, which refers broadly to the nation Israel and specifically to the Messiah, who is a direct descendant of Abraham.

Genesis 12:1-3, *Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, From your family And from your father's house, To a land that I will show you. ²I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."*

God's purpose to bless the earth through His chosen people is a revelation of His love and mercy.

The entire human race has rebelled against God. He could have righteously judged us all. But because of His love and mercy, He purposed to bless us through His plan of salvation.

To prepare the world for the coming of Messiah, God chose Abraham and his descendants through Jacob. The nation Israel was to be a people under God's rule. To such a people, God would send the Saviour of the world.

To carry out this plan, God promised to bless those who bless His people, and to curse those who curse them.

When the psalmist cries out for judgment on Babylon, he is appealing to God to carry out His covenant with Abraham so that ultimately all peoples would be blessed.

Even though God's chosen nation had sinned and was reaping God's temporal judgment through the Babylonian captivity, the psalmist is asking God to overturn that judgment by cursing the nation that had cursed them.

This is in line with God's greater purpose to bless the world through the seed of Abraham.

C) God will fulfil His word.

God's Word can and must be trusted.

When God says that something will happen, you can count on it.

God's purpose to fulfil His Word reveals His faithfulness. You can trust God to do what He promises.

What had God promised concerning Babylon?

He promised to fully repay Babylon and to level its walls.

Jeremiah 51:56, 58, *⁵⁶Because the plunderer comes against her, against Babylon, And her mighty men are taken. Every one of their bows is broken; For the Lord is the God of recompense, He will surely repay.*

⁵⁸Thus says the Lord of hosts: "The broad walls of Babylon shall be utterly broken, And her high gates shall be burned with fire; The people will labour in vain, And the nations, because of the fire; And they shall be weary."

The psalmist was invoking God to fulfil the promise He had given through Jeremiah the prophet.

God's promise to level the walls of Babylon was no small thing!

Babylon was surrounded by an outer wall between 42-56 miles in circumference, 11 feet thick, and 75 feet high, with watchtowers and a moat outside it!

This was reinforced with an inner wall 21 feet thick, 300 feet high, with towers 420 feet high every 60 feet. And there were other inner walls!

Who could imagine that such a mighty city would become a heap of ruins?

But God prophesied that it would happen, and it did!

A prophecy of God's judgment on Babylon for her sins, Isaiah specifically prophesied that their little ones would be dashed to pieces before their eyes.

Isaiah 13:16, *Their children also will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; Their houses will be plundered And their wives ravished.*

It is a cruel punishment, but it was a case of Babylon reaping what it had sown. It had inflicted this awful torture on others. It would reap the same punishment itself.

If God has promised something in His Word, He will fulfil it.

When the psalmist invokes God to destroy Babylon, he is asking God to fulfil His prophetic word and thus prove Himself faithful.

Understanding of God's purposes to punish sin and reward righteousness, to bless the earth through His chosen people, and to fulfil His Word through His prophets helps explain the psalmist's harsh words against Babylon.

2. Psalmist Attitude.

The Psalmist was not looking for personal vengeance.

His prayer was not, "Give me an opportunity to get even with those scoundrels!"

Rather it was, "Lord, You avenge the evil done to your people."

That is a significant difference. We see this difference in practice when we compare David's imprecatory psalms with his personal actions.

He often prayed that God would act against his enemies. His passion for justice often caused him to be outraged when he heard of injustice and evil.

2 Samuel 3:26-39; 4:1-12; 12:1-5.

But when he had a chance to kill his personal enemies, such as Saul, he refused to do it.

The imprecatory psalms are not rooted in a spirit of personal vengeance!

Rather in a passionate desire for God to vindicate His people by judging the wicked.

It is the same kind of righteous anger that would cause us to pray that a murderer or child molester be brought to justice.

Psalmist was concerned about God's cause.

There is no taint of personal jealousy, spite, or ambition in these psalms.

Rather, there is a deep concern for God's people.
There is a desire for God's glory to be displayed.

In the case of David's imprecations, those who opposed the king opposed God, because the king was God's anointed.

In the case of the other imprecatory psalms, they are all national, not personal in character.

The psalmists in every case had a deep desire that God's plan might be fulfilled through His people for His glory.

He was not seeking vengeance or being selfish.

Rather, he was asking God to vindicate His people who had been mistreated and to fulfil His plan through them.

3. In view of New Testament.

Some people erroneously think that Jesus abolished or contradicted the Old Testament Law.

Matthew 5:17, *“Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil.”*

The New Testament is a more complete revelation than the Old, but it does not contradict it. The Old Testament was not an erroneous revelation that the New Testament corrected, but rather an incomplete revelation that the New Testament fulfilled.

A) Personal vengeance is not taught in OT & NT

Some think that the law of retribution, “eye for an eye” meant that personal revenge was prescribed by the Law.

Exodus 21:24-25, *eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*

Leviticus 24:20, *fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him.*

Deuteronomy 19:21, *Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*

The Pharisees in Jesus' day used it that way. But this was not the intent of that law.

In fact, it was just the opposite. The "eye for an eye" principle applied to civil law in the sense, "Do not avenge yourself, but let justice be administered."

On the personal level the Law stated.

Leviticus 19:18, *"You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself; I am the Lord."*

The apostle Paul quoted from the Old Testament when he commanded Christians not to take vengeance.

Romans 12:19-20, *Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head."*

Deuteronomy 32:35, *Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; Their foot shall slip in due time; For the day of their calamity is at hand, And the things to come hasten upon them.'*

Proverbs 25:21, *If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;*

B) Judicial punishment of the wicked taught in OT & NT

The law of retribution was to be applied impartially by judges to carry out justice and to discourage others from evil.

Deuteronomy 19:20-21, *And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you. ²¹Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*

In the New Testament, the authority to punish and avenge evil is given to the state.

Romans 13:3-4, *For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. ⁴For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.*

On a broader level, God uses governments to bring about judgment on other nations through war.

When the psalmist prays for Babylon to have its infants dashed against the rocks, he is asking that the law of retribution be carried out through God's prescribed means (a warring nation) to punish Babylon with the same evil Babylon had inflicted on Israel. He is invoking God for the judicial punishment of the wicked.

C) Loving enemies implicit in OT & NT.

The Old Testament teaching that a person should render assistance to his enemy.

Exodus 23:4-5, *"If you meet your enemy's ox or his donkey going astray, you shall surely bring it back to him again. ⁵If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden,*

and you would refrain from helping it, you shall surely help him with it.

Proverbs 25:21, *If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;*

There are several examples of love for one's enemies, such as Joseph's love for his brothers who had sold him into slavery. David's kindness toward King Saul who was trying to kill him.

In the New Testament, Jesus corrected the common mistaken notion that the law taught hatred for enemies. He showed that the true interpretation of the law requires us to love even our enemies.

Matthew 5:44, *But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,*

Paul said to bless those who persecute you.

Romans 12:14, *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*

And yet Jesus blasted the Pharisees with strong words (**Matthew 23**).

Paul wished that those who perverted the gospel might be accursed (**Galatians 1:8-9**).

Paul cursed Elymas and called down blindness on him (**Acts 13:9-11**).

On a personal level, Jesus, and Paul both showed love for their enemies. But on a judicial level, they called down God's judgment upon men who perverted God's truth.

The psalmist is doing the latter when he prays for judgment on Israel's enemies.

D) Ministry of reconciliation offered.

God has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation.

2 Corinthians 5:18-19, *Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,¹⁹ that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.*

Our prayers, behaviour, and words toward those opposed to Christ should be aimed at offering them the free grace of God through the cross.

If the chief of sinners could find mercy, none is beyond hope!

1 Timothy 1:15-16, *This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.¹⁶ However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all*

longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him for everlasting life.

But the same blood of Jesus that offers mercy to those who repent brings condemnation to those who refuse to repent.

John 3:18, 36, *“He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God
³⁶He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”*

We should never take de-light in the thought of God’s judging our enemies, because He does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they repent and live.

Ezekiel 18:23, 32, *Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die.*

³²For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord God. “Therefore turn and live!”

If we must warn them of judgment, we should do it with compassion, not with glee.

I trust that viewing the imprecatory psalms in light of God's purpose, the psalmist's attitude, and New Testament revelation helps explain them. But God's Word is profitable not only for teaching, but also for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness.

Application

How can we practically apply Psalm 137?

The atrocities of sin should be viewed with Holy Horror.

The psalmist is not simply trying to address us, but to shock us into seeing the awfulness of sin.

Just as a scream in the night gets our adrenaline flowing and motivates us to action. The psalmist wants us to have an emotional reaction to the sin which has taken place. We are too mild in our hatred of sin.

Does the thought of a soldier bash a baby's head against a rock cause you revulsion?

What about women in this world paying doctors to chop up their babies so that they don't have to be inconvenienced by an unwanted child?

The abortion industry should anger us and shock us into action. To use violence to fight it is wrong; but so is passivity.

What about the homosexual and sinners mock God?

Incompatibility of the World and Word.

Just as these faithful Jews could not sing Zion's songs in Babylon, so God's people today should not join in the frivolities of the world.

The Babylonians might taunt the Jews, but they knew nothing of the solid joys of Zion.

The world might taunt the Christian, but it knows nothing of the joys of being a child of God. Even though we live in Babylon, we need to be distinct people.

Find God in Foreign land.

The Jews refused to play their harps in Babylon (**V 2**).

They stood firmly for the Lord, yearning for worship in Jerusalem (**V 4-6**).

In spite of their defeat and in spite of Babylon's great power, there could be rebuilding and hope.

God's promises do not fail, even when the circumstances seem the blackest. Great Babylon was destroyed.

God's people live on!

No matter how difficult our situation, we can obey the Lord.

Deeper commitment to God and His righteousness

The thought of Jerusalem in ruins brought these Jews to tears. They didn't have it all that bad in Babylon. They easily could have been assimilated into the Babylonian way of life.

But they had an intense longing for God's city and God's worship. They would not settle for anything less.

How badly do you want to see God's church established?

How earnestly do you yearn for righteousness for yourself and God's people?

Could you say, with the psalmist, that you exalt God's church above your highest personal joy (**V 6**)?

What kind of difficult circumstances would it take to cause you to lay those desires aside?

The difficult but true words of Psalm 137 should stir us to cast off our worldliness and apathy and to reaffirm our commitment to the living God and His church.