

Week 13 – Psalm 137

Imprecatory Psalms

Psalm 137:1-4

- This Psalm reflects the experiences of a Jewish person, perhaps a temple musician, who has experienced the trauma of being carried off to exile in Babylon.
- Verses 1-4 portray the crisis of faith experienced by those carried off into exile.
 - o The exiles were dumbfounded that God would ever allow his people to fall to the evil Babylonians.
 - o The Psalmist recalls the early days of exile when the Jews sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept as they remembered Zion (v 1).
 - o The harps once used in worship hung on the trees nearby.
 - o Their captors mockingly demanded they sing songs of joy for them (v 3).
 - o The Psalmist lifts up a profound question, “How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” (v 4).
- The mocking request brings the spiritual crisis the Jews are facing to the forefront.
 - o Many of the “songs of Zion” speak of God’s unfailing protection of his people and his holy city.
 - o “God is within her; she will not fall. God will help her at the break of day” (Psalm 46:5)
 - o “God is in her citadels; he has shown himself to be her fortress. . . As we have heard, so we have seen in the city of the LORD Almighty, in the city of our God; God makes her secure forever” (Psalm 48:3, 8).

Psalm 137:5-6 – Remembering Jerusalem

- The Psalmist makes a solemn oath to never forget the primacy of Jerusalem for Jewish faith.
 - o To remember Jerusalem is to not let go of the fact it is God’s holy city and to trust that God will one day restore Jerusalem to her former glory.
 - o To keep on remembering Jerusalem is to keep faith that God has not abandoned his people forever.
- The second part of the oath spells out the consequences of breaking the oath.
 - o First, he asks that his “right hand forget its skill” (v 5).
 - The verse literally reads may “my right hand forget” a play on the promise not to forget Jerusalem.
 - The NIV adds skill. Other translations add another object like “cunning.”
 - The phrase may simply mean to wither up – a severe consequence for a musician.
 - o Second, he asks that his tongue cling to the roof of his mouth (v 6) if he does not consider Jerusalem his highest joy.
- The Psalmist believes his skill should only be used in the service of Temple worship. If he forgets that, he is willing to lose his musical skills altogether.

Psalm 137:7-9 – A Bitter Request and a Perverse Beatitude.

- The Psalmist now calls on the Lord to remember Israel’s enemies, the Edomites (v 7).

A Song for Every Season: A Study on the Psalms

- These were the descendants of Esau (see Genesis 25:30) who apparently celebrated Jerusalem's destruction.
- Obadiah is a prophetic diatribe against the Edomites for not only celebrating Jerusalem's destruction, but for looting her treasures, and massacring Jews fleeing her destruction.
- The Psalmist turns his attention toward "daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction" (v 8).
 - The Hebrew is in the past tense, "you who are destroyed."
 - There is no indication in the Psalm that Babylon has already been destroyed, hence the NIV's use of the present tense.
- Two beatitudes celebrate those who will bring destruction on Babylon.
 - The first declares blessed those who repay Babylon for what they have done to Judah.
 - The second declares blessed the one who seizes Babylonian infants and "dashes them against the rocks" (v 9).
 - This stark language reminds us of the gruesomeness of ancient warfare.
 - In 2 Kings 8:12, Elisha describes what the Ammonites will do Israel, "You will set fire to their fortified places, kill their young men with the sword, and dash their little children to the ground, and rip open their pregnant women."
 - We can certainly think of people in our own day who either wish or enact violence against those who they see as threats to God's sacred symbols.
- What do we do with these verses?
 - We remember that these are prayers from a victim of atrocities.
 - We remember that these are not the only verses that discuss what a Jewish response to Babylon should be.
 - Jeremiah warned that the people should not see Jerusalem and the Temple as unassailable places. God would not allow their sins to go unpunished, even if it meant allowing harm to come to his holy places.
 - In contrast to the Psalmist prayer, Jeremiah calls on the exiles to build houses and settle down in Babylon and to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29:7).
 - He also says of their time in Babylon, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all of your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).
 - The Psalms give us permission to pray what we feel. The totality of the scriptures remind us that not all of our prayers will be answered in the affirmative. God meets us in our anguish, but often pushes to move beyond our emotions and into his mercy and grace.

Other Salvation History Psalms

- Psalm 35 – The Psalmist asks God to contend with those who contend with him.
- Psalm 69 – The Psalmist asks God to pour out his wrath on his enemies.
- Psalm 109 – The Psalmist asks God to punish an enemy by turning his children into wandering beggars.

Sources

- Davidson, Robert, *The Vitality of Worship* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1998).
- Goldingay, John, *Psalms*, Volume 1: Psalms 90-150, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2008).
- May, James L., *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1994).