

Sermon
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Psummer of Psalms: Imprecatory
Psalm 137

We Sat Down and Wept

May the words spoken, and the words received, be only in your service, great God of Love. Imprecatory psalms. Whew! Psalms that express rage and a desire for revenge. What do we do with these? They're not pretty.

Listen to this song, "Deliver Us," by Richard Bruxvoort Colligan, based on Psalm 58. If the music makes your ears hurt, all the better. The music reflects the pain, anger, and desire for justice of the imprecatory psalm.

(Play music.)

What is the concept of an imprecatory psalm? Sometimes it expresses individual wounding, a deep pain of one who feels wronged, feels let down by God because forces in the world have caused them harm, feels so deep a wound that they can't imagine feeling whole again.

I confess that I have felt such anger. I have hurled swear words at God, and others. I have desired revenge. I plotted and schemed in my imagination. I have wanted people to hurt just as badly as they hurt me. I have wanted them to bear the shame their actions caused me to feel.

If you tell me that you, too, haven't experienced such feelings, I would be skeptical. Either you aren't being honest with me, or you aren't being honest with yourself.

One scholar writes, "The real problem with not that there is anger in Psalm 137. The real problem is that there is anger in every human heart." There are times when such great losses cannot and should not be forgiven quickly at the peril of understanding and mourning the loss, at the peril of an authentic journey of grace to forgiveness. When to forgive is an attempt to forget the precious thing that was lost that need not have been save for the destructive actions of another.

While some of the imprecatory psalms are personal pleas, many are the pleas of the community. This is the type we find in Psalm 137. We don't know a lot about the origin and context of most psalms, but this psalm gives us clues. Since the words are in the past tense, it was likely written right after the Jewish captives have been returned to Babylon. And likely written by a Levite, the group of Jews who were priests and served the Temple, including as religious musicians.

They came back to their city that lay in ruins. Their temple, considered the very home of Yahweh had been destroyed. That which was considered unshakeable was nothing more than a pile of rubble. And symbols of their captors and the foreign deities remained, mocking the Jews who several generations earlier had been taken captive and marched to Babylon to serve a foreign ruler. Their property had been seized or destroyed, their wealth taken, their homes left behind, their future stolen, and their faith in peril.

Psalm 137 recalls how, when they were in Babylon, their captors taunted them. Remember, the Babylonian captivity was a time before monotheism, before the Jews recognized that their god, Yahweh, was, in fact, the name for the one God of all the earth—the one creative force, the one who claimed justice and shalom as central to a thriving creation, the one of whom we claim, "God is Love." Their Babylonian captors mocked them by asking the Levites to sing the songs of Zion. In other words, to sing the songs of Yahweh.

"Sing those happy song, you who are under our power," they said. "Sing about your impotent god Yahweh, who couldn't save you from the gods of Babylon and your enslavement!" This type of taunt has echoes in the gospel. The guards of the Roman empire taunted Jesus as he hung helpless on the cross. "Save yourself, if you really are the Messiah!"

It is this kind of cruelty—this faith-shaking cruelty—about which the psalmist writes. Psalms of imprecation are descriptions, not prescriptions. But there is danger if we aren't critical readers, if we don't

recognize and read them this way. Imprecatory psalms don't teach us that seeking revenge is what we should do. Rather, they teach us about our human condition. That anger—especially justified anger—that threatens to overtake us should be offered before God, trusting that God's judgment is sufficient.

Yes, Psalm 137, with its words that hope for the destruction of the whole nation of Babylon, including its future, its babies, is harsh. It is appalling. But if we let ourselves get stuck on the words of anger expressed, we lose our sense to be appalled by the injustice that preceded it, by the condition out of which the prayer arose. As gory a metaphor as it is, I can say honestly that I hope that the seeds and the future, of enslavement and xenophobia and religious intolerance as the sins named in this psalm are dashed against the rocks. I hope that the seeds of every oppression are dashed against the rocks and thoroughly destroyed. I take that hope to the God of Love, who will judge such oppression to be unrighteous, and will work with and through us to establish God's vision of shalom.

The psalms, as a body of prayer, give us permission, and in fact let us know that our faith requires, authenticity before God. In a psalm of imprecation, the anger and thoughts of another's destruction is given over to God. We relinquish any claim to act out against the offender in our pain, and leave judgment to God. As one scholar writes, "To relinquish control and to pray, even in anger, that God's will be done is the heart of model prayer" as Jesus taught the disciples. Offering our anger to God is to place ourselves before God in order to be transformed by Mercy, Justice, and Compassion.

In our own times, might the refugees seeking asylum write their own prayers of anger, casting judgment on the United States for equally appalling behavior. Might they be justified to pray out of their own experience that God would treat our children the way their children have been treated?

Any time we are in the role of power and privilege, it is our responsibility to listen to these cries. We are to listen beyond the anger that might even be directed at us, if we are to truly hear and understand the situation of injustice to which such prayers point. And then our job is to repent and ask God for the grace to make right the oppression we have allowed to be committed in our name.

As difficult as the imprecatory psalms are to read, let's really listen to them. They offer us a model of prayer when anger threatens to overcome us. They teach us that we are not so different from our spiritual ancestors in that we all experience the range of human emotion, and that no emotion is more than God can take. God wants our all. These types of prayers in scripture also invite us to listen more carefully to these types of prayers in our own context. Who is praying? What is the context? What is the injury? Where do we fit in—in consolation or in repentance?

The psalms challenge us. And always the prayer is "God, may *your* will be done," even if we ourselves may have God's will twisted, we can trust in the one whom we call Love.