

## *How Shall We Sing This Lord's Song?*

Psalm 137

7/14/2019

John Song

Good morning Columbia Presbyterian. My name is John Song. I'm the associate pastor of youth ministries here. And if it's your first time here, maybe you're new to Christianity. We'd like to welcome you here to this church. We'd like at this time to ask parents with children aged 4 to 1<sup>st</sup> grade to go for age appropriate instruction and worship. And of course, they are more than welcome to remain here and worship with us as our covenant children. So, parents, you have the power. Exercise your rightful authority with wisdom, grace, and hopefully a smile.

If you have your Bible, please turn to Psalm 137. Now, some of you I know are already bracing yourselves as we turn there. But for those of you who aren't familiar with this Psalm, we need to give a little bit of context before we begin. We are spending a summer series in the Psalms, and every two weeks, we split up the two weeks by spending the first week going over a category of the Psalms and the themes that surround it. And then the second of the two weeks, we take a look at the specific Psalm in that category. So, we've gone over wisdom Psalms, we've gone over historical Psalms. And last week, we introduced a category of lament Psalms called the imprecatory Psalms, or Psalms of cursing. And as pastor PD covered last week, these are the Psalms that are crying out to God for God to strike down their enemies in the midst of unspeakable and unfathomable pain.

And while we might be able to empathize and understand those who are in great pain and suffering crying out for justice and vengeance, there remains a great question for us in 2019 as we read through the imprecatory Psalms. And that is, why are these curses here in the Bible? And more than that, why are these songs for the people of God? And if at all, how can we go about singing such songs today?

This is the million dollar question we are trying to answer. How shall we sing this Lord's song? And so, we turn perhaps to the most difficult and challenging of the imprecatory Psalms, Psalms of cursing. Psalm 137, here we go.

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there, we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy! Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, "Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!" O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Please pray with me.

Our Heavenly Father, we just read this Psalm that is your authoritative divinely inspired, inherent, infallible word given to us. And in some way, this is a song that we can sing for the people of God. And we admit that as the modern church, Psalms like this jar us in ways that they go against the grain of the image that we've constructed of you. And so, we pray that today we would have clarity in the preaching of your word, that the Holy Spirit would illuminate for us what the song pictures, that the song would picture Christ to us. And Lord, that this Psalm would not lead us to skepticism, but to singing. And this can only be possible if you act right now, O Lord. So, we pray all of this in the name of your precious Son, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Well, where were you in 2002? Some of you weren't here. Some of you hadn't even been born yet. Where were you? I was a senior at Wilde Lake High School down in Columbia, Maryland, right beside the Slayton House where I was being interrogated by a parent regarding his daughter who at the time, I may or may not have had a slight crush on. The crush was based on all the frivolous high school reasons. She was a girl. I was a boy. She was in band. I was in band. I mean, we all know where this story is going, you know?

So, there I stood with her father. And like any good father would do, wondering what this guy was doing hanging out with his daughter, questions came up. What are your hopes and dreams? What things have you accomplished? Do you shower? You know, the usual fair. And it became known to him at a certain point in the conversation that I was a professing Christian, at which point his concern shifted entirely.

Now, unbeknownst to me at the time, me being a Christian meant that I was probably out of the running for his daughter. But his concern shifted more towards asking the question of, does this young senior in high school know what the Bible actually says? And so, he pulled out a Bible from his shelf that he had read. And he made me look at Psalm 137 and made me read it in full. And then he simply asked me, what do you think about this? Now, he didn't say this in an antagonizing or hateful way. As he had read scripture, and he took it seriously. He read through the entire Bible. And as he read this, he came to the conclusion that in reading Psalm 137 that whoever this God is, surely this God can't be a good God worthy of worship.

Now, apart from the Holy Spirit working within us to profess the truth of this word, we might say, who could blame him? On the surface level, in a very cursory reading, the psalmist seems to be advocating horrible and terrifically evil things. And this should at the very least make the Christian uncomfortable as they read it. How do we make sense of this? How shall we sing this Lord's song?

In order to do this, we need to unpeel the layers beneath the surface of what's happening here in Psalm 137. And to start with that is to understand the context in which Psalm 137 is written and come to a place where rather than just throwing on our modern-day eyes and making judgements, we can look at the psalmist and empathize with his situation.

You see, Psalm 137 was written around the time when the people of God, the Israelites, had returned from exile to Jerusalem. And while most of the songs in book five of the Psalms – that is Psalm 107 to 150 – are joyous Psalms. When you read book five, it's like a big rejoicing party that's going on. And when you read book five, you see these Psalms reminding people of the victory of God. And then you get to Psalm 137. It sticks out like a sore, literally. Even two Psalms before, Psalm 135 and 136, these songs are the most fantastic rejoicing you've ever heard. "Praise the Lord! His steadfast love endures forever." And then this immediately, like a record scratch, pulls us back. Immediately, the tone shifts to a lament that reminds the people of God of the oppression and pain that they went through while in exile in a place called Babylon.

And these verse three verses, verses 1-3, detail the mourning in the mockery. This is the first point in your outline, mourning in the mockery. You see, Babylon, quite literally, is everything that Jerusalem and the holy city of Zion were not. The waters of Babylon in verse 1 with huge, vast systems of canals across the Tigris and Euphrates all in these fertile plain. Harvests are everywhere, tributaries in every direction. It's every city's foundation for prosperity and life. To make a city in this particular climate was to guarantee that you would never go thirsty, that you would never starve, good times were ahead for you. To be a Babylonian was to be safe, was to be comfortable.

But to the Israelites, everything they saw by the waters of Babylon was a mockery of their hometown in Judah. Judah was a city filled with hills and valleys, not plains and streams. Judah was a culture and a picture of one God whom they worshipped in their one temple. Judah was supposed to be the land that God would never forsake. And yet, here they are reminding themselves that they were once captives under a pagan nation that tore down all their temples and walls, tore down their culture,

imprisoned their most capable sons and put them into forced labor, and spit in the face of their God. When you hear the psalmist saying that they used to sit by the waters of Babylon, they were staring into the prosperity of wickedness that tortured and maimed its people, and weeping because they remembered God's holy city used to be as prosperous as Babylon was. And they were weeping because they know that while they were in Babylon, they were commanded by God to seek the prosperity and peace of Babylon – prophet Jeremiah – and now they were forced to assimilate into this culture that destroyed their culture.

This was a mourning that removes all ability to sing or do anything that resembles joy. Verse 2, they hand their instruments that they used to praise, their lyres, on the cymbal of Babylon's prosperity, these giant willow trees. Now, they haven't given up their faith. They haven't destroyed their lyres. But they simply no longer have a song that they can sing anymore. In verse 3, their tormentors and their mockery are forcing them to sing the songs of Zion.

Now, musical warfare has always been a tactic that's been used for torture. But more cruel is to use the culture's own songs as a mockery that you've been defeated and that there remains no hope for the god that you're professing. Sing to us one of the songs of Zion, they would jeer. Sing to us Psalm 83, "Better is one day in your courts than thousands elsewhere." I want to hear that one. Your courts don't exist anymore. We destroyed them. We conquered you. We destroyed generations of your children. Sing to us one of those songs. What hope could there possibly be to sing when your defeat is so resounding? It's facing a reality that songs of joy and worship might never come again.

I just want to pause and ask just a simple question. Is that you here today? Perhaps you are broken and you're barely holding on to the whole Christianity thing. You're going through the motions. You're clinging onto faith because you see yourself as broken. You see yourself living in the land of your enemy. While they seem to prosper and flourish, there you are stumbling, hurting, weeping in a metaphorical Babylon. Perhaps you've come here today, and you feel like, why should I sing? Why should I worship? Perhaps, dare I say, maybe the church has been your Babylon. And you look around and you see all these people, and you just cry because you remember a time when things used to be simpler, purer in your walk with Christ. And maybe you even start questioning why you came into faith in the first place, you know? What did I eat in the summer of '96 when I professed Jesus Christ as Lord? What was going on with me? Did I hit my head or something? What happened? Why did I have so much joy back then, and I have so much brokenness now?

You see, it's only here that we are able to understand the starting point for the raw emotion and passion that we see later on in this text. And it's here that we can empathize. We can understand, in the second point of your outline, how we can have faithfulness in the foreign, faithfulness in our foreign circumstances. Psalm 137 gives us this window – to borrow a phrase from one of my favorite pastors – that it's okay not to be okay. Too often, we're told in well-meaning people and well-meaning churches that the Christian posture and demeanor is one where we have to sort of stuff all of our negative emotions inside so as not to bother or to cause burdens onto other people. The psalter here gives us a completely different picture.

The whole range of human emotions tells us that weeping, clinging onto faith when you're rejected and remembering the horror of loss are songs that we can sing to God. He wants us to express that. We can even sing a song that expresses this very emotion, verse 4, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" How can we do this when our holy city, the holy place Zion, is destroyed? How can we do this when we're surrounded by everything that resembles the contrary?

The psalmist here is showing us that we can because the God of the Bible can absorb the grief that we bear. We can even sing and pray these things to Him, our doubts, our unbelief, our struggles, our frustrations, our pessimism. All of it can be a worship to Him.

John Calvin, in the midst of a very real and present pain of the reformation where martyrdom was an imminent reality and persecution was felt across every side, he wrote this in his commentary of Psalm 137:4. He writes this,

“In the word ‘foreign land,’ the psalmist reminds us that Babylon is our foreign land. It’s not to be called home. In our own day, great as the danger may be to which the faithful expose themselves by not conforming to the example around them, the Holy Spirit makes use of such a barrier as this to separate them from sinful compliances. We have been bereft of our temples and sacrifices. We wander as exiles in a polluted land. And what remains but that in remembrance of our outcast state we should sing and groan for the promised deliverance.”

I love that line. I love that phrase, “sing and groan for the promised deliverance.” Church, today, wherever you are, you can groan in the midst of our walking with Christ.

See, what’s beautiful about the structure of the Psalm is that the word here that you see repeated over and over, the “we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion,” “we hung up our lyres,” “our captors.” That word for “we” and “our” used nine times in just the first three verses of the Psalm is an expression in the original language of the Hebrew that sounds like a groaning. So, even as they’re singing the Psalm recounting their pain, they’re using a Hebrew word that is literally like as if they were groaning, this word for “we” and “our.” And every time we hear the “our” and “we” in this Psalm, we can hear their groanings as they remember the pains of Babylon.

Again, I want to stress, this is so important for us to hear because too often we’re told to fake it for the sake of others. Don’t show people how you’re really feeling. Don’t release your pain and your shame. Just hold it in. And by the way, don’t go to God with that kind of pain. He doesn’t like that. When I open up Psalm 137, the comfort that I have is that it gives us the permission to come to God with our darkest doubts, fears, and worries. You see, it’s only when we arrive to that place that we have a place for us to come back to remember loyalty to our God.

This is what binds and gives the Israelites the strength and resolve in verses 5 and 6 of this passage to recommit their lives back to God, that their right hands forget their skill, forget how to play the lyre if they forgot the holy city, that their right hands would be cut off, that their voices would not be able to sing anymore, verse 6. Their tongues would stick to the roof of their mouths if they forgot who God was and what He had done for them.

You see, this is a pain that drives them to remember that they are not home yet. They are awaiting a place that would be, at the end of verse 6, their “highest joy.” And the very nature of the fact that they are in this state of misery shows them and proves to them that God isn’t finished with them yet, that joy is yet to come. So, now, this being the source of the pain, now we can empathize with the context of their suffering. You have to understand the first six verses before you get to the controversial 7-9. It’s only then that we can begin to unwrap and unravel their anger in the abominable.

This is the third point in your outline, anger in the abominable. What we see here are three cries for the justice of God to be enacted in these three verses. The first is a cry of justice against their brothers who betrayed them in their downfall against the Babylonians. You see, the Edomites were actually descendants of Esau, Jacob’s brother. They were supposed to be family. And yet, as Old Testament history played itself out, the Edomites saw themselves as superior to their brothers, the Israelites. What older brother doesn’t think of himself as superior to his younger brother? And here, this played out throughout biblical history. And so, the Edomites were complicit and aided the Babylonians to victory.

So, here the psalmist is recounting one of the sources of their pain, their very own family plotting their downfall to Babylon, “Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!” the mockery of the Edomites. And the psalmist is appealing to God’s justice because, you see, he remembers the prophecy against the

Edomites. If you read Obadiah, one of the shortest books of the Bible, you will see that Obadiah prophecies that the Edomites were to be destroyed for their wickedness, for their rebellion, for their betrayal of the Israelites.

And so, in verse 7 of this passage in the Psalm, we see the cries, look at what you did to the Edomites? Right? We're calling upon the justice that we know that you do, O God. We're calling upon you to act. We're calling upon the faithfulness that you've demonstrated to us against the Edomites. The psalmist is crying out in his pain remembering God's faithfulness to pursue justice for one of God's enemies.

And in verse 8, he turns to pursue justice for Babylon. And this is where the second and third cries come in, verses 8 and 9, and all the difficulties and challenges that surround them. On the surface level, if you look at verses 8-9, this is the kind of bitterness, anger, and downright sorrow that would make any rational person – like that father on that fateful day in 2002 – ask the question of why these words would be in the Bible. “Blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us!” The word “blessed” here probably linked more to the word “content” rather than the word “happy.” “Content” is the one “shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” How could the Bible support this kind of cry? What kind of a loving God would allow these words to be sung?

For our western ears, this seems like it's horrific. But we must remember and consider why they would specifically cry out these words of judgement. You see, when Jerusalem was conquered by Babylon and the Israelites were sent into exile, the Babylonians didn't just simply want a military victory. The ancient practice of warfare towards a conquered nation is that you didn't just win the war. You won the war upon the next generation by snuffing it out completely. Babylon took Jerusalem's sons and daughters and wiped out as many of the next generation as they could by throwing them against the rocks. And when Jerusalem returned from post-exile, and Babylon as a nation is still standing at this point and is still prosperous and it's still wealthy, all the rage and the anger and the horror and the tragedy of that moment, seeing their sons and daughters brutally and unremorsefully killed. All that rage comes out in this moment in verses 8-9. There is no comfort that will soothe the Israelite, no Christian platitude you can give them that will ease that kind of pain.

The only expression that is left is to find a way to release that pain and anger. And the question is, who do you release that to? This can only happen when the honesty of one's own heart in this tragedy can fully surrender the intensity of that pain and anger to God Himself.

Now, notice what the psalmist here isn't saying. The psalmist isn't saying that he would take things into his own hands. The psalmist isn't suggesting that this is what God must do. This is just a cry of hurt that goes beyond any measure, a hurt that is relived everyday when they see that their children are not with them, a hurt that is trying to cling on to faith in the midst of trying to heal while this oppressive nation still stands. This is an anger that is surrendered and given up to God in the very songs that they sing.

So, when we see this, when we look beneath the surface, we see the context of their suffering, we see the intensity of their pain, then maybe perhaps we can empathize with this kind of a cry. We can emphasize that, and we need to see that at times, what it means to be human is to experience the full intensity of our sorrow, to long for God to avenge those who had been lost in the same way that they were treated.

A book was released last month that I had a chance to read through this week. It's called *Grace Will Lead Us Home*. It's by Jennifer Berry Hawes. She was a Charleston reporter who covered the entirety of the tragedy that occurred four years ago in Charleston, South Carolina, when a white supremacist by the name of Dylann Roof walked into Emmanuel Church with the intentions of starting a race war by murdering nine African Americans who were congregating for a Bible study that evening.

If you recall, two days later, Dylann Roof was indicted and arrested. And the whole world watched and marveled at the forgiveness demonstrated by those who had lost loved ones particularly the stirring and painful testimony of one Felicia Sanders. Felicia Sanders said this, “We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms. You have killed some of the most beautiful people I know. Every fiber of my body hurts. Tywanza Sanders is my son, but Tywanza was my hero. May God have mercy on you.” And we as the watching church marveled at such forgiveness and the demonstration and the extension of love.

You see, Felicia Sanders was there the night of that Bible study. She saw her youngest son Tywanza killed by the gunman right before her eyes. Tywanza was actually the one who confronted the gunman. He asked him, why are you doing this? Tywanza said, “You don’t have to do this. We mean you no harm.” Upon which, the gunman replied, “I have to finish my mission,” and shot Tywanza three more times.

Felicia was applauded for her forgiving heart and the grace she showed the killer, and rightly so. But what happens in the aftermath? How does one deal with the sorrow and loss after such a tragedy? In this book *Grace Will Lead Us Home*, Hawes documents the story of the months and the years that followed. And it’s a necessary read, by the way, if you want to understand the tension between the complexity of forgiveness and the longing for justice of your enemies.

You see, months after all the chaos of the nation had died down, Felicia would go onto every single trial and court case that involved Dylann over the course of the next two years. She did this out of faithfulness to the ones that had lost their loved ones. She had to recount the details of the pain she experienced. She carried around with her a Bible which contained the outline of the bullet that had missed her. She had to endure seeing Dylann and the lack of expression he had on his face each and every single time he recounted his version of the events. She struggled with her own sense of purpose and calling. For her, while she forgave Dylann Roof, she could not help those emotions within her that longed for justice to be served for her son and for the other eight victims.

Hawes writes this stirring story at Dylann’s final sentencing hearing. Felicia was asked to give a testimony and share the events with the jury that would be holding Dylann’s fate. And what was important about this particular sentencing was that the defendant’s of Dylann Roof were trying to get Dylann a lighter sentence by portraying him as mentally deranged. But Felicia knew the game that was being played. And her normally warm tone took on the air of derision and anger for the very first time. And this emotion overwhelmed her completely, and she said, “Dylann’s evil. There’s no place on earth for him except the pit of hell. Send him back to the pit of hell, I say.” And she cried out, “He is evil. He is evil as evil can be,” crying, weeping, trying to understand why the justice system would try to make Dylann’s sentence lighter when she suffered the greatest loss of all. Where is the justice? Where is the hope?

Now, would anyone here in that moment dare to say to somebody like Felicia, well, you should know better than to say things like that? Could anyone blame her for the anger, the agony she feels, the emotion pouring out knowing that in her cooler moments, she did long for Dylann to have the mercy of God and to repent and believe?

This is what it means to have anger in the abomination. This is the emotional empathy we give to the psalmist to express the frustration of a seeming lack of justice, the longing to see retribution in the midst of a deep and lasting sorrow. This is how we can sing this song today, not that we literally wish for the words of verses 8-9 to happen to our enemies. We love our enemies. We’re called to pray for them. We’re called to forgive them. But at the same time, knowing that because vengeance is the Lord’s and He will repay, that those emotions of anger and frustration are not acts of justice that we take into our own hands, that the source of healing can only be to take these things up to the Lord.

Derek Kidner writes in his beautiful commentary of the Psalm,

“The psalmist is, of course, saying in cooler moments that God would render to every man according to His works. But we are not given those words in that particular form. These words come to us white-hot. We need to receive the impact of verses 8 and 9. This raw wound thrust before us forbids us to give smooth answers to the fact of cruelty. To cut this witness out of the Old Testament would be to impair its value as revelation both of what is in man and what the cross was required to achieve our salvation.”

This is what leads us to our last point here today, that this Psalm actually helps us to see Christ in the cursing. Felicia Sanders, in spite of all the rage that she felt, knew that forgiveness to Dylann Roof was required of her. In the book, it outlines time and time again, she’s saying, “I know I have to forgive him, and I do forgive him,” because she fundamentally understood what her Savior had done on her behalf. All of us here in this room who profess faith in Jesus Christ understand that without the mercy of God the Father to send down His Son, His Son as the penalty to pay the penalty of our sin, Christ who takes on the curse for us, this horrific judgement of the pains of hell, Christ who looks at us who once were Babylon, He says, I will die for these people. I’ll be raised again to life for their salvation. This is what Christ takes on, the horrors of the curse.

We, apart from Christ, apart from the forgiveness that He extends to you and I, we are the ones deserving of this very guilty verdict in verse 9. We deserve the sentencing of death. You see, if we understand the judgement we deserve, we would understand our need for this Jesus who takes the devastation of sin and bears all of its penalty, takes the justice upon Himself. Now, we may not have committed the horror of Dylann Roof or even the atrocities of the Babylonians, but our sin and the terror left in its wake does not leave us guiltless. We ask ourselves the question, who of us can stand before this judge and say that we deserve less than His wrath? What chance of hope do we have?

And the beauty of this Psalm is that it makes us realize that we need someone else to take on the horror of this on our behalf. We need Christ to redeem us. Do you believe that here today, Christian? The grace, the grace, the grace of Jesus Christ who takes this for you. He calls us His children. He becomes the curse for you and I so that in the love of God, we can be made whole again, that we no longer have to hold our vengeance and bottle it up inside, but trust and know that our God is righteous because He has been righteous to us. Do you believe that God is big enough to handle the darkest places of your thoughts and of your souls and know that you can surrender these songs up to Him trusting in Christ to restore you and then prepare you again over time through healing to love your enemies and pray for them?

Church, it’s my prayer that we can. It’s my prayer in Psalms like this one that we read the psalmist’s heart. We empathize with the psalmist’s pain. And as they are clinging onto faith, we realize how great a salvation we need in Christ Jesus. And we’re going to sing about that grace here and now. So, let’s all go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we thank you for the reality and the joy of what it means to be human, Lord, and the pain of what it means to be human. We thank you for Christ who takes on the curse of sin that we deserve on Himself. We thank you for songs like Psalm 137 that remind us that we can go to you in our deepest pain. We can cry out for vengeance, Lord, knowing that it is yours to repay, not ours. And that we can be renewed, we can be restored, and we can go out and love our enemies and love our neighbors as ourselves. Father, I thank you for the grace of Christ that binds us all here today. And Lord, if there are those in here who are struggling to sing, may they be reminded of the grace and forgiveness they have received in you. And may they give up all of their emotions to you. So, Lord, won’t you help us to do that right now as we sing about your grace? In Jesus’s name we pray. Amen.