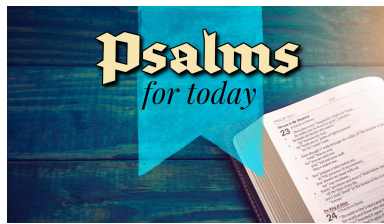


## Psalms for Today: Psalm 137

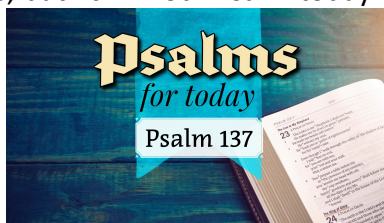
Jeremiah 39: 1-9

Psalm 139



Last week, we discussed a difficult Psalm. The hopelessness in Psalm 88 often overshadows the fact that it's still a powerful reflection of faith.

Not to be the bearer of bad news, but I think our Psalm today is more difficult.



Today, we read Psalm 137. Like last week with Psalm 88, it has something very valuable to tell us that can easily get lost in the imagery. You'll see what I mean soon enough.

The Bible is a unique book.

If you buy a non-fiction book, you know what you're in for. You're going to read about something that really happened. If you buy a fiction or sci-fi or fantasy novel, you're on a make-believe journey. If you buy a book of poetry, you're in for reflection and beauty.

But in the Bible, we get all of these and more in one volume. So it's vital to know what you are reading when you open up a book or read a passage. You can't read poetry the same way you read a historical account.

Today, we are reading poetry. In poetry, we can expect a couple things: for example, vivid imagery and raw emotion. So as we go through this Psalm, let's remember that we are reading something meant to evoke emotions.

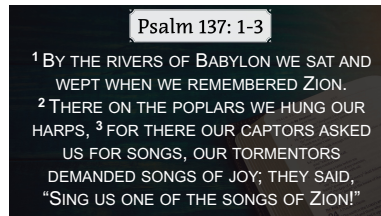
It will also help us today to go through this Psalm in three steps. The first two steps will be pretty straightforward, but they very much set up what's to come. The third step is where things get tricky.

And finally, and possibly most importantly, we need to remember one thing: all of Scripture is pointing us to something, leading us to a more full picture of who God is.

We can't ignore passages like Psalm 137, even (maybe especially) when they're hard to understand.

When we start choosing what parts of Scripture to embrace and what to ignore, we immediately put ourselves on shaky ground. We put ourselves on ground defined by our own sensibilities and not those of God.

We need to look at the difficult passages. We need to understand them in their context. We need the image they give us of God.



So let's do that with Psalm 137. And let's start with the first step, which is reading verses 1 – 3:

*<sup>1</sup> By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.*

*<sup>2</sup> There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,*

*<sup>3</sup> for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"*

This is our "Once upon a time" for this passage. Here is where we find the characters, the place, and the time.



The Psalmist is sitting with a group of people, his fellow Israelites. They are sitting along the rivers of Babylon, which tells us this is the time of exile after the destruction of Jerusalem. We read about that in our first scripture today from Jeremiah.

To summarize, though, Jerusalem's defeat was total. The Babylonians burned the city, including homes. They captured Jerusalem's king, blinded him, and killed his children to completely end any claim to the throne. And they took the people who remained into captivity.

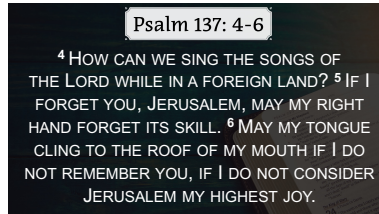
So this Psalm opens with the Israelites in exile remembering their home, which has been destroyed and to which they are unable to return.

To make things worse, while they are in captivity, they are being mocked. That line in the third verse, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” represents their captors laughing in their faces.

“Sing us one of your old songs! We know how much good those do, don’t we? Entertain us!”

It’s mockery. It’s salt in the wound. But it sets up what’s to come.

And that is step one. It’s our who, what, where, when, and why. Step two is the “how,” in terms of “how are they feeling in the midst of this?” Let’s read verses 4 – 6 now:



*<sup>4</sup> How can we sing the songs of the Lord  
while in a foreign land?*

*<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
may my right hand forget its skill.*

*<sup>6</sup> May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not consider Jerusalem  
my highest joy.*

This part is easy. They’re homesick.



They feel unable to sing the songs of God because they’re so far from their home.

They are worried about forgetting Jerusalem, about becoming complacent in a foreign land.

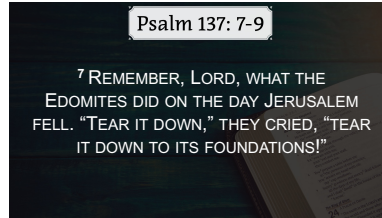
They are so serious about this that they would curse themselves if they end up forgetting Jerusalem. If they can’t remember Jerusalem, they don’t want to do or say anything again.

Remember, this is poetry. These are raw emotions. Do they really want their hands to be useless and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths? Maybe not.

But it gives us a poetic glimpse into just how homesick they are.

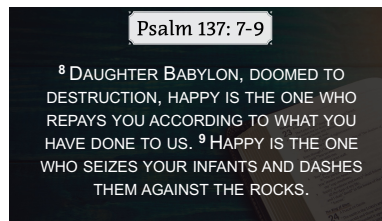
Knowing all of this is vital before we take our third step this morning. We need to know their frame of mind and their history before we read this.

We need to know they have been wronged. They are captive. They are mourning. They are angry. And they are homesick. We need to know all of that.



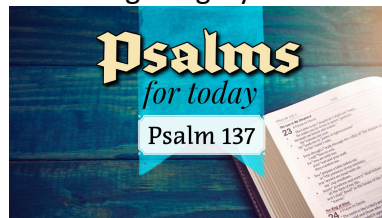
So now, let's take our last step, verses 7 – 9:

*7 Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did  
on the day Jerusalem fell.  
"Tear it down," they cried,  
"tear it down to its foundations!"*



*8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy is the one who repays you  
according to what you have done to us.  
9 Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
and dashes them against the rocks.*

Oh boy. What do we do with this disturbing imagery?



Are we justifying murder? That goes against a commandment. Obviously not.

Are we saying God condones revenge? That flies in the face of the teachings of Christ. So not that either.

So what are we to take from this terrible image?

I must again remind you: poetry. There is raw emotion at work here. There is also a desire for revenge here. The Babylonians did this to the Israelites, and so the Israelites wouldn't mind if someone did it to the Babylonians in return.

But we're told in our Bibles that revenge is not ours, so there must be something else at work here.

Well, there is. I believe Psalm 137 points us towards two vital reflections for our faith.



Psalm 137 is a reminder to trust in God and God alone for deliverance.

With the Bible, we need to read it by turning the pages – and not just when you're finished reading one page. Sometimes we need to go back and forth to see the connections that happen through the whole thing. That's why some Bibles have chain references in them that send you to other verses. Those are there for a reason.

This image with the infants and the rocks is exactly that: a connection to something else.

The thirteenth chapter of Isaiah is a prophecy, another type of literature in the Bible.

Through His prophet Isaiah, God promised a day when Babylon would fall. And the language we see in Psalm 137 about the infants and the rocks is part of that prophecy from Isaiah.

Psalm 137 then, is a prayer asking God to follow through on what He promised.

I mentioned earlier that Scripture points us to a more full picture of who God is. We get stuck on just a few images of God. We know we serve a God of love and of mercy and of grace. Those are parts of the full image of God.

We cannot forget that vengeance, judgment, and justice are also part of the full image of God.

A God of vengeance and a God of judgment isn't always something we always like to talk about. This part of the full image of God, especially when that image includes things like those in Psalm 137, it may not sit well with our modern sensibilities.

But guess what? It doesn't have to.

We are not the creators. We are the creation. We don't make the rules. We follow them. And there is repayment waiting for those that do not.

Psalm 137 is the Psalmist saying, "God, I'm not going to take this into my own hands, but I am going to trust that You keep Your promises."

When find out that the Psalmist is leaning on this promise from God that those who do evil will face God's own punishment in God's own time and manner, whether we understand it or not, whether we agree with it or not, we get a different picture.

We see that we can let go of our own claim to revenge and leave that part to God, and that is a powerful testament to our ultimate faith in Him.



Psalm 137 also directs us to build our spiritual home in an eternal foundation.

We all know that having a home is important. Home should bring us joy. Home should make us feel good and make us feel comfortable.

But we also know that everything in this world is temporary. Seasons come and go. Kingdoms rise and fall. From dust we were made and to dust we will return.

So the question is...is the foundation for our spiritual home made in something temporary?

I think the Israelites made too much of their spiritual home in something that was ultimately temporary. I think their foundation was too much that city of brick and stone, holy as it was.

We know how important Jerusalem was as their holy city. If we go back and look at verse six, it's right there. They consider Jerusalem their highest joy.

And so, when that foundation crumbled, they were lost. They were unable to even sing to God.

Are we like them? Do we build our spiritual home on temporary things?

That can take so many forms. We can be like the Israelites and make too much of our home in a temporary place of worship. You know, this building is ultimately just that...a building. Like Jerusalem, eventually it will fall away.

Let's hope it's never burned to the ground like Jerusalem, but it is still temporary. Is our foundation in the brick and mortar of a temporary building?

We can do that with relationships and people. We can build too much of a spiritual foundation in the people around us. Unfortunately, in this world, people and relationships are also temporary.

Is our spiritual home built too much on a temporary foundation?

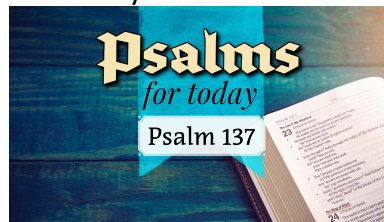
The resolution for us is just like the resolution for the Israelites at the end of Psalm 137 as the Psalmist ultimately decides to trust in God's promises.

We need to build our spiritual home on a foundation that is eternal. We need to build our spiritual home on God and on the promises He makes to us.

That doesn't mean that our place of worship and our friends and family and loved ones aren't important to us. It doesn't mean that at all.

But it does mean that above all, our foundation, and ultimately our spiritual home must be built in the permanent, in the eternal, in the everlasting.

And that means our foundation should only be God.



Psalm 137 isn't the easiest passage in our Bible. The imagery, I won't lie, it's shocking.

But when we dig into it, when we understand better what we are reading, we still find that all of scripture, even this part, is useful for our own good.

In Psalm 137, we find a powerful message of where we place our trust, even when we are wronged.

We find a poignant reminder of where the foundation for our spiritual home must be built.

And what Psalm 137 points us towards in both cases, is always and only God.

And all of God's people said...