

Summer in the Psalms

Imprecatory Psalms – Psalm 137

1. Imprecation

2. Illustration

- Pathos (vs. 1-3)

- Defiance (vs. 4-6)

- Curse (vs. 7-9)

3. Application

Link to Psalms video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9phNEaPrv8>

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com



West Valley Church
August 18, 2019
Michael W. O'Neill

Summer in the Psalms Imprecatory Psalms¹ (Psalm 137)

We are continuing our sermon series called "Summer in the Psalms." There is incredible depth and richness in the Psalms that has remained undiscovered and untouched for many of us, so we're spending time in them.

We learned that the purpose of the Book of Psalms in the Old Testament is this:

Psalms is a book of prayers to help you obey God's Word and stay faithful to Jesus Christ.

That's what the Psalms are helping us to do – to learn about prayer.

Remember, we talked about the different types of Psalms – there are different styles or types that we recognize and can group them in. Today we are going to look at particularly difficult type of Psalm. A lot of people really struggle with these psalms we're going to look at, but I'm looking forward to this conversation and getting past the misunderstandings.

Before we do, I thought today would be a good day to give us another overview of the Psalms. On the first Sunday of this series, I gave you a general overview, but today I want you to see a video that gives a very, very good description of the book of Psalms and its organization and purpose. I think you are going to appreciate this. I need to tell you, though: it's about 8 minutes long, which is a bit longer than the videos we might typically show in this setting, so you need to hang with it because it's worth it. And I should warn you, you will need to pay attention; it moves kind of fast, so you'll want to listen closely. Okay? Let's watch this:

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j9phNEaPrv8>)

Was that helpful? It's amazing, isn't it – the way that Psalms has been written? Psalms is a celebration of God's Word and of THE Living Word, Jesus Christ, the Messiah. Just so you know, there is a link to that video in the sermon notes section

¹ **Sources of research:**

- Stephen J. Lennox, *Psalms: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis, IN: Wesleyan Publishing House, 1999)
- David Thompson, *Psalms 1-72: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition, New Beacon Bible Commentary* (Beacon Hill Press, Kansas City, 2015)
- Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973)
- Allen P. Ross, "Psalms," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985)
- John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)
- W. Graham Scroggie, *The Psalms* (Old Tappan New Jersey, Fleming H. Revell Company, 1973)
- Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity Press, 1988)

of your app. You can also access it on the sermons page of our website. I'd encourage you to watch it again, because I'm sure there are some things you probably missed – it went pretty fast.

But that overview helps us because it's going to give us a context for what we talk about today. As you can see in your notes, we are going to look at something called the "Imprecatory Psalms." This is an interesting but misunderstood part of the Bible – these are really strange and violent psalms. Honestly, people who reject Christianity often will use *these* Psalms as their reason. I can understand why they'd be confused – *if* they don't take the time to understand them. I think I can help us do that today.

So to begin, I want to talk about what...

1. ***Imprecation*** means.

The word itself is a name that scholars have given to this particular group of Psalms. Depending on what scholar you are reading, there are between six and fourteen of these Psalms. The word "**imprecate**" means "**to pray evil against,**" or "**to invoke curses upon**" another. There are other Psalms that ask God for protection against enemies or for God to destroy enemies, but these particular ones go into quite a bit of violent detail about what they are saying that they want to have happen to their enemies.

So I want to explain what the deal is with these particularly violent prayers in the Psalms, then I want us to sort of dissect one of them, then we'll talk about what this means for our own prayer lives. Sound like an adventure? 😊

I think the best way to explain them is to first read one, so you get an idea of how bad they are. So I want to read what's considered the worst of them, and it's also the one we're going to dissect next. The one I want us to read is Psalm 137. Could I ask you to stand with me while I read it? Whether we like this Psalm or not, whether we understand it or not, it is *still* God's Word, and we need to respect that, have faith that it is there for a reason, and trust God to use his Word in our lives, just like he promises to. Okay. Psalm 137:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.
There on the poplars
we hung our harps,
for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?
If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.
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.

Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did
on the day Jerusalem fell.
“Tear it down,” they cried,
“tear it down to its foundations!”
Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,
happy is the one who repays you
according to what you have done to us.

Happy is the one who seizes your infants
and dashes them against the rocks. (Psalm 137, niv)

Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks. And every said “hallelujah and amen”? What in the world? That’s not the kind of sentiment you usually see on a Hallmark card, is it? Okay, you can have a seat.

Now you understand why these Psalms are difficult and why you’ve probably never heard a sermon about them.

There have been theologians and church leaders down through the ages that have had strong opinions about these Psalms. Many, including CS Lewis, said that we should avoid reading them, we should *never* pray them, and that they should not be in the Bible, because they seem to so totally contradict what Jesus taught in the New Testament about loving our enemies. But Jesus actually quoted some of them, especially when talking to the Pharisees. So I agree with other scholars who feel that these Psalms really do have an important place in Scripture, because of what they are *actually* about and what they mean.

Okay, so what do we know? First of all, these Psalms are not what they appear: they are not just angry, bloodthirsty outbursts crying out for revenge; they are actually **prayers addressed to God**. So *the writer is praying to God, not calling out to his enemies*. That’s important, because it is a prayer for God to enact justice in the world. He isn’t trying to take out a contract against his enemy or use God as the hit-man! It’s a cry for Divine justice in the world. That’s important to remember when we look at Psalm 137 in a few minutes.

The other thing that is important in these Psalms is that the attacks that the writer refers to are not personal attacks against him; **they are** (seen as) **attacks against God’s Kingdom purposes**. These psalms are written about nations that have attacked Israel – God’s people. These are not about personal, individual attacks. Remember too that it was through God’s people, Israel, that the Messiah would come to save the world, and it was through David’s own family line that the promised Messiah would come. So an attack against David and Israel wasn’t about threatening *his* life – but it was a threat to the family line from whom the Messiah would come. *These prayers were asking God for justice to ultimately defend his Kingdom purposes* – especially to not let anyone get away with a threat to stop God’s plan to bring the Messiah into the world. Remember in the video, it talked about the

two main themes: Torah, and Messiah. So these Psalms are actually an affirmation of how important the Messiah is. Do you follow that?

It's important to see that David wrote the majority of the imprecatory Psalms, but David wasn't a vengeful guy. When it came to David's personal enemies, he actually showed kindness toward them and trusted God with the outcome. Time and again David was assaulted by Shimei, Doeg, King Saul, and even his own son Absalom. Each time, David didn't raise his hand against them, even though he could have. He never tried to get his own revenge – he let God do it. In Psalm 35, David prays about how his enemies would attack him, but while they were sick, he would pray for them to get better. When they didn't get better, he mourned for them like he would his brother or mother. This is another reason to see that these prayers weren't personal; David wasn't a vengeful guy. These were about God's Kingdom.

Finally, these are prayers that only **affirm** what **God** already said he would do when he **will ultimately judge sinful people and evil nations**. In other words, these prayers are simply stating what God has *already said he would do*, which is this (listen): one day there is a judgment coming, and those who reject God and his Kingdom, those who choose to remain in sin, *will be judged*, and they will be sent to a horrible place that Jesus described as “unquenchable fire” (Matthew 18:18), a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:41-42), a place of “destruction” (Matthew 7:13), and “outer darkness” (Matthew 25:30). The Bible also calls Hell a “lake of burning sulfur” (Revelation 19:20), “eternal suffering” (Matthew 25:48), and “eternal separation from God's presence” (2 Thessalonians 1:8, 9), among other things. The point is that these Psalms are simply affirming the incredibly violent reality that those who ultimately are against God will face an eternal judgment called Hell that is so bad that “dashing infants on rocks” will seem like nursery school. I'm not trying to be glib; on the contrary I'm deathly serious. Now, maybe you are wondering how a loving God could send someone to Hell. Listen: God doesn't send anyone to hell. *God has never, will never send anyone to Hell. But God won't stop someone from going there who refuses to turn to him and receive his free gift of grace, love, and abundant life. We are all headed there unless we accept God's free gift of love through Christ.*

Does all that make sense? Okay now let's look specifically at Psalm 137 as an...

2. ***Illustration*** (Psalm 137) of imprecation Psalms.

This Psalm was written after the entire nation of Israel was violently overthrown by Babylon, and the citizens of Israel are in captivity, having been relocated to Babylon. We begin with a deep sense of...

- ***Pathos*** (vs 1-3)

“Pathos” means something that evokes pity or sadness. This Psalm starts out talking about being beside the rivers of Babylon. Babylon was not situated near any mountains or hills, so they had a huge system of canals that had been built across an

enormous flat, dry plain. That geography would have been completely different for the Israelites, who were used to the hills and valleys of Judah.

What's going on is that their captors, the Babylonians, are demanding that the Israelites entertain them by singing the happy songs of Zion, so that the Babylonians can mock Israel and rub their faces in the fact that they've been captured.

So the writer talks about hanging their harps, or lyres on the branches of the poplar trees. You know what a lyre is, right? It's like a cross between a guitar and a harp. But the writer is saying, "It breaks our hearts that we aren't in Zion anymore, so we can't even muster up the songs."

When you try to sum up what is happening, it really reminds me of a song I used to hear a lot on the radio when I was a teenager. Let's see if you recognize the lyrics:

"I went down to the sacred store
Where I'd heard the music years before
But the man there said the music wouldn't play

And in the streets the children screamed
The lovers cried, and the poets dreamed
But not a word was spoken
The church bells all were broken...the day the music died..."²

Do you remember that song? It was written about the plane crash that killed Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and JP Richardson – the day the music died. It was such a sad day that he couldn't sing.

That's what the Psalm writer is feeling; the music has died in him.

Then his pathos turns to...

- ***Defiance*** (vs 4-6)

He is sad and heartbroken that the city and nation that he loves has been overrun and violently destroyed, and singing those songs will make him grieve even more. More than that, he knows that by singing those songs, the citizens of Babylon will only mock him and his people and ridicule their God and nation. So he moves from sadness to defiance; he's saying, "not only am I too sad to sing them, I *refuse* to sing them. I won't let you mock our God and our people."

So we're seeing a shift in emotions from sadness to defiance to outright anger, which leads to the prayer that asks for a...

- ***Curse*** (vs 7-9) on Babylon.

Okay, keep in mind what we said earlier about these kinds of prayers in #1, because I think you will see that in play here. "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks."

² Songwriters: Don McLean. *American Pie* lyrics © Universal Music Publishing Group, Songtrust Ave, Spirit Music Group

First of all, look at the word “happy.” That word “happy” means much more than a feeling; it is used to describe someone who trusts in God. It’s the same word Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount, what we call the “beatitudes.” So the very curse starts out by saying this isn’t something *we* do – *we don’t dash infants on rocks*, we trust God to carry out justice in this world. It starts out declaring faith in God to carry out justice.

Next, see the word “infant”? That isn’t a word that describes *age*. It was used to describe *relationship*. It’s like this: our sons, Sean, Ryan, and Brenden, are all adults. But they are still my children, my sons. They aren’t my babies; but they are my sons. That’s what the word “infant” means. So the writer isn’t talking about newborns; he is referring to Babylon in general – its leaders and the leaders coming up next. They were *all* sinners, and the sin was being carried out by the elders and by the younger generation, too. All of them deserved God’s judgment.

Something else you need to see: remember that I said Babylon was in a huge desert plain – that it wasn’t near mountains, hills, or valleys? It was in modern-day Iraq. It’s a desert. There were no cliffs, no rocks for their infants to be dashed upon. The writer couldn’t dash infants on rocks even if he wanted to; there were no rocks. So the writer is NOT speaking *literally*; *he is speaking metaphorically and prayerfully for justice*.

Finally, I want you to realize that this prayer was not so unusual 3,000 years ago. The world at that time lived by this idea or moral code called “*lex talionis*” – justice that involved “an eye for an eye.” Even the Old Testament talked about this in Exodus 21:23-25. For them, justice meant that whatever you did to someone else, you should rightfully expect that the same thing will be done to you as punishment. That was justice; the punishment should fit the crime, right? Well, here’s the deal: when Babylon violently overthrew Israel (as well as any other nations), guess what Babylon did? They literally hurled the baby Israelites against the rocks and killed them. That is *exactly* what Babylon did! That’s historically verified (and that was the PG description of what they did!). Babylon was a very, very violent nation. That’s how they conquered other nations. So the Psalmist is only asking God for “*lex talionis*” – to return upon the heads of the Babylonians exactly what the Babylonians did to the Israelites. He is praying for justice.

Does all that help? Are you able to put these Psalms into perspective? So then, the question becomes, what does that mean for us? What can we learn from it? What is our...

3. *Application?*

I think there is some valuable instruction for Christians that we can get from the imprecatory Psalms. The first thing we can learn from these Psalms is that – **it’s okay to be angry (but do not sin)**. Like the lament Psalms that we talked about last week, these show us that we need to be honest with God in our prayers, and that it is okay to be angry. The Bible never condemns being angry; on the contrary, the

Bible acknowledges that we get angry – that’s a given – it just instructs us to make sure we don’t *sin* when we are angry:

“And “don’t sin by letting anger control you.” Don’t let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil.”
(Ephesians 4:26-27, nlt)

Remember that Jesus got very angry with the Pharisees (Mark 3:1-5; Matthew 21:12-13; Luke 19:45-48) and he never sinned. These Psalms teach us that there is a right way and a wrong way to get angry. Remember to – **talk to God about it**. The whole point of this series this summer is that we can pray honestly to God, who already knows our hearts anyway. So be honest. If you are angry, talk to God about it! And when you talk to him about it, – **ask God to take care of revenge**. Remember, the Bible very clearly tells us that it is not up to us to determine how to carry out revenge. The Apostle Paul reminds us:

“Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, ‘I will take revenge; I will pay them back,’ says the Lord.” (Romans 12:19, nlt)

Let God manage when and where revenge will take place. The Bible is also very clear: YOU must forgive and love. But remember, these prayers are not about personal vendettas; they are about the advancement of the Kingdom of God in the world. So make sure you always – **pray against evil**. Let me simplify this, according to the imprecatory Psalms: anything that would hinder or stop the advancement of God’s Kingdom is evil. It can be a person or a nation – even our own nation. Whenever you are praying against evil in this world, you are, by default, praying at the same time *for* the advancement of the Kingdom of God’s love in that person or nation.

And when it comes to evil, I think it is important to understand what Babylon represents in the Bible.

In the ongoing Bible story of the Jews, the Babylonian captivity is significant. It came about because Israel’s leaders and people had abandoned God and worshiping him and had chosen sin – they removed God from their culture, their families, and their lives. So God sent prophets to warn them, time and time again, that if they didn’t repent and turn to God, they were going to be overthrown and sent to captivity. But the people of Israel rejected the prophets, ridiculed them, imprisoned them, and even killed them. Finally, God had enough, and it happened. They were overrun, their temple was destroyed, and they were sent off to a foreign land as captives. Babylon was ruthless and powerful. Even though the captivity only lasted 70 years, it left an indelible stain on their story. And as the story was told and retold through generations, Babylon came to represent the worst of evil in this world. When you read the book of Revelation, you read about God finally overthrowing “Babylon” – which is a term to refer to the most selfish, greedy, violent, and evil of human systems, structures, and nations. In the Bible, Babylon is *any* evil systems of this world that take advantage of the poor, the oppressed, and the powerless. So you and I really do need to pray that God will bring justice against and the

destruction of the Babylons of this world, and pray for the advancement of the Kingdom of God's love and Grace.

Prayer