

Psalm 137

August 25, 2024

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Psalm 137

Session Outline

1. Mourning (Psalm 137:1-3)
2. Remembering (Psalm 137:4-7)
3. Judgment (Psalm 137:8-9)

Theological Theme

God is patient and merciful but also will punish those who ignore His warnings. He allowed Jerusalem to be defeated and the people taken into captivity where they mourned their losses and remembered Jerusalem in hope.

Call to Action

Where in your life do you feel like an exile? What would it look like to praise God in the midst of lamenting your circumstances?



Leader Guide

Psalm 137

Introduction

Newton's Third Law of Physics says every action has an equal and opposite reaction.¹ If you immerse a large object in a small tank of water, the water will splash out as it is displaced in accordance with the mass of the object being submerged. Simply put, actions have consequences.

Our society is made up of rules that have consequences for ignoring warning signs. Your car will not continue to drive if you ignore the warning that your fuel is low. There are people who naturally push the limits when they see warning signs and, instead of stopping to address the issue, will see how much longer they can avoid the problem. But eventually choices catch up with us and consequences occur. Today, we are studying a passage that describes what happened when the people of God pushed too far and resisted responding to the warnings from God. Eventually, they faced terrible consequences.

- ❓ When was a time you avoided a literal warning sign and later regretted it?
- ❓ How do you typically respond when you see a warning sign—whether literal or figurative? Stop? Turn around? Push farther? Why?

Session Summary


This is a psalm of mourning and lament. This was written either while the children of Israel were in exile or just after returning to Jerusalem. They had been attacked and defeated by the Babylonians. Many were taken back to Babylon after experiencing the persecution of their people.

Though they recognized that God was still in control, they had lost their songs of worship. But the memories of Jerusalem and life before the consequences of their sinful ways were what sustained them and gave them hope for a different future. They also remembered the promises of God to bless those that blessed them and curse those that opposed them. This promise led them to call for God to deliver punishment to both Edom and Babylon.

1. Mourning (Psalm 137:1-3)


The children of Israel were reaping the punishment for their sins and refusal to turn back to God in repentance. Now in Babylon as exiles, they could look back and see the error of their ways despite the multiple opportunities God gave to repent. This psalm was set in the foreign land of Babylon and most likely was written during the exile or immediately following it.

Remembering the promised land caused the people to mourn their former life. Their persecution of their captors fed their sadness and intensified their grieving. Far from home, they gathered on the banks of the river for worship. Remembering Jerusalem caused them to weep bitterly and cry out to God. Everything around them was a reminder of their plight and caused them to reflect on all that had been lost. This was a sad and difficult time for the people of God and yet it was a time of their own making.

 How does it affect you when you realize your suffering is a result of your own choices? How do you typically respond in these moments?

To emphasize the depth of their sorrow, the people hung their harps on tree branches. This signified a loss of praise and joy. This stood in contrast to their history as a community of believers who worshiped the Lord. This same people were now captives in a foreign and evil country. Songs of joy and praise were far from their lips and were replaced by songs of deliverance as they longed for God to bring them home.

The Babylonians would taunt the Israelites and command them to sing the songs of Zion. The people who had plundered their land and taken them hostage back to Babylon sought entertainment in the Israelites' sorrow. Adding literal insult to injury, their enemies minimized the Israelite's faith as a means of further aggravation.

 When have you been mocked for faith in Jesus, whether directly or indirectly? How do you respond in these moments?

Instead of praise and worship, the people offered the sound of silence. Sometimes silence can be powerful and moving. But the musicians among the exiles had not completely given up on finding their song again. They waited on the Lord and repented of what brought them to that place, hoping there would be a day when praise and worship would flow once again.

The Brutality of Judgment

After the beautiful lament of 137:1–6, the reader is jolted by the astonishing ending to the Psalm. This brutal blessing shows the Jews' anguish over what had happened to their nation.

- Application: How do you typically respond when it is hard for you to find joy or praise the Lord? How do all believers face this reality at some point?

2. Remembering (Psalm 137:4-6)

The writer of this Psalm vowed to remember Jerusalem and never forget what they had lost when they were taken from their home. Jerusalem represented right worship of God. Even those who lived outside the city had a deep love and respect for Jerusalem.

- How has the center of worship of God shifted for believers today? What freedom do we have that Old Testament believers did not have?
- How can we seek to remember the truths of God when our circumstances tell us to do otherwise?


The psalmist vowed to be cursed personally by losing the ability to play and sing were he to forget Jerusalem. Holding tight to their memories of Jerusalem gave the Israelites hope that they would be delivered and returned to this holy place. They remembered God and all He had done for them, looking forward and yearning for the way life had been before their transgressions against the Lord.

Memories can be a powerful motivator to draw us back to the truth of God. As we think back on our past with Christ, we remember not primarily our faithfulness but the way He is faithful and has given evidence of this truth throughout our lives. The people were not seeking to remember the physical location of their homeland but what it represented as their true home in God.

- Application: How does God's past faithfulness give you hope for what He will do in the future when you face difficult times?

3. Judgment (Psalm 137:7-9)

Not only did the psalmist remember Jerusalem, but he also pointed toward the coming judgment of the nations. He asked God to look at Edom and remember their actions during the conquest of Jerusalem. Whereas he previously sought to remember in hope, here He called God to remember as a means of judgment.

-  How does it encourage you to know that God promises to deal with those who continually do evil? How should this change the way we respond to those who seek our harm?


The Edomites were descendants from Esau, who was Jacob's brother. Jacob had his name changed to Israel and was the patriarch of the nation of Israel. The people of Edom should have been considered extended family. Even distant relatives should have sympathized and supported the Israelites under attack and yet they enjoyed the suffering and destruction of Jerusalem, even crying out for Jerusalem to be destroyed down to the foundation of the city.

The psalmist also called for the opposition and judgment of Babylon. He spoke directly to the future generations of this nation, giving them notice that they would suffer devastating consequences for their role in the destruction of Jerusalem and the children of Israel. This was a reminder that the Babylonians not only attacked God's people, but they also attacked Him.

The Babylonians were known for barbaric warfare, and the captive Israelites had witnessed atrocities against their loved ones. The writer called for God to do to the Babylonians as they had done to the Israelites and their children.

-  This is a challenging passage. What does this teach you about the seriousness with which God views sin?




Despite Israel's sinful choices that had led them to this place, they could remember Jerusalem and trust that God was still in control. The psalmist wrote of the punishment that would eventually come to the Babylonians and called for God to do what only He could. We can also find ourselves in difficult places due to our own wrong and sinful choices. When that happens, it is important to remember that God is patient, loving, gracious, and merciful. We can repent and turn back to Him as we humbly trust in His faithfulness to restore us into right relationship with Him. The hope we have in Christ is the anchor that holds us steady when we face storms of life, even the storms of our own making.

-  Application: Where might God be calling you to repent and turn back to Him today?

Conclusion

The consequences for their idolatry and sinful ways led the Israelites to be taken into captivity. It was a terrible and brutal time for the people of God to the point that their songs of praise all but disappeared from their lips. Enduring brutality and mockery from their captors, the exiles remembered life in Jerusalem and clung to the hope they would be restored back to their home by God.

Faced with the repercussions of their sin, the people remembered the faithfulness of God in Jerusalem and His promise of God to deal with anyone who came against them as His people. The psalmist called the Lord's attention to Edom and Babylon, trusting that as these two nations had mistreated and attacked Israel, they would also face judgment. God's people can trust and believe what He says and be encouraged to endure difficulties by remembering who He is and all He has done.

-  What is a situation from your past that encourages you to persist in trusting God today?
-  How can we as a group remind one another of our reasons for worship even when life is hard?
-  Who will you seek a gospel conversation with to point them to the hope God offers in Christ?

Prayer of Response

Praise the Lord for His faithfulness and justice. Ask for conviction of any places in your life where you have given in to sin and repent of anything that God brings to your mind.

Memory Verse

How can we sing the Lord's song on foreign soil? If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem as my greatest joy! — Psalm 137:4-6

Additional Resources

- *The Psalms* by Christopher Ash
- *Be Exultant* by Warren Wiersbe
- *The Treasury of David* by Charles Spurgeon

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Psalms

Purpose

There are myriad messages scattered through the 150 psalms, but overall, this record of the responses of God's people in worship and prayer serves the purpose of teaching us how to relate to God in various circumstances of life. The psalms also demonstrate God's sovereignty and goodness for his people in order to instill confidence in those who trust in him.

Author

Since the book is a collection of many different psalms written over a long time, there is not just one author for this collection. By far the most common designation in the titles is "Of David," which may refer to David as the author of those psalms. David's role as a musician in Saul's court (1Sm 16:14–23) as well as his many experiences as a shepherd, a soldier, and a king make him a likely candidate for writing many of these psalms.

The problem is that the mention of his name in the titles consists of an ambiguous Hebrew construction. It is nothing more than a preposition attached to David's name. The preposition could be translated "written by," "belonging to," "for," or "about." This does nothing more than relate the psalms bearing that title to David in some way but not necessarily naming him as author. The translation "Of David" accurately conveys this same ambiguity.

Other titles include the designations of Solomon (Pss 72; 127), Asaph (Pss 50; 73–83), the sons of Korah (Pss 42; 44–49; 84–85; 87–88), Ethan the Ezrahite (Ps 89), Heman the Ezrahite (Ps 88), and Moses (Ps 90). All of these use the same Hebrew preposition as appears with David's name and therefore have the same ambiguity about authorship. In the case of Asaph, although he was one of David's chief musicians (1Ch 6:39), the name itself became associated with a group of musicians bearing the same name (Ezr 2:40–41). This might explain why an apparently postexilic psalm (Ps 74) includes the title "of Asaph."

Setting

The book of Psalms consists of many different hymns and prayers composed by individuals but used by the community. If one were to take the names in the titles as authors, the date of composition ranges from the time of Moses (fifteenth century BC) to a time following the exile (sixth century BC or later). Some of the titles do contain historical information that might indicate the setting of the composition, although even this (like the authorship) is ambiguous. They might not refer to the date of composition but to the setting of its contents, being composed some time after the events had taken place. This is a more likely scenario since some of these psalms describe life-threatening situations, where composing a psalm in the heat of the moment would not have been a top priority. In many cases, these psalms include thanksgiving sections as well, showing that they were written after God had answered the prayers.

Special Features

The word for psalms in Hebrew is *Tehilim*, which means "praise." The English title is derived from the Greek translation (LXX) *Psalmoi*, which means "Songs of Praise." Praise directed to the Lord, the God of Israel, is certainly the primary emphasis in the Psalms. Some have referred to the Psalms as Israel's hymnbook, which is partially true but overall is insufficient to account for all that is in the Psalms. More than one-third of the collection is made up of prayers to God. Therefore, it contains both hymns and prayers that were used in the context of Israel's worship.

Extended Commentary

Psalm 137:1-9

137:1 The rivers of Babylon were a series of canals running through the southern plain (Ezk 1:1; Dn 8:2). During the exile, the assembled community grieved there.

137:2 The trees of Babylon were not the familiar olive and cedar trees of the promised land.

137:3 By asking the community to sing songs of Zion, Israel's captors were tormenting and mocking them (42:3, 10; 79:10).

137:4 The Israelites could not engage in worship since the land of Babylon was unclean and Israel had no temple.

137:5–6 The psalmist took an oath to stay loyal to Jerusalem, which represented the city, the land, and the temple, symbols of God's promise to Israel.

137:7 Remember reflects the theme of the psalm. Israel "remembered" Zion (v. 1), made a pledge to remember Jerusalem (vv. 5–6), and asked the Lord to "remember" Jerusalem's devastation by the Edomites (v. 7). The Edomites descended from Esau, the twin brother of Jacob, and served as Babylon's allies in the destruction of Jerusalem (Ezk 25:12; 36:5). Destroy it is literally "strip it down," that is, "raze it."

137:8 Who pays you back what you have done to us reinforces the concept of (Lat) *lex talionis*, or receiving a punishment equal to the crime (Ex 21:23–25; Mt 5:38–42). God pays back those who reject him (Dt 7:10; 32:35; Is 65:6), and he specifically promised to repay Babylon for their crimes against his people (Jr 51:56).

137:9 This imprecation (see 109:1–31) is startling. Out of the psalmist's intense emotional state, seething with righteous anger, he called for the execution of just vengeance against the wicked who had perhaps done the described acts (takes ... and dashes) to Israel's little ones (see Is 13:16).²

References

1. "Newton's Laws of Motion," NASA, accessed June 3, 2024, <https://www1.grc.nasa.gov/beginners-guide-to-aeronautics/newtons-laws-of-motion/#newtons-third-law-action-reaction>
2. Kevin R. Warstler, "Psalms," in *CSB Study Bible: Notes*, ed. Edwin A. Blum and Trevin Wax (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017), 934–935.