

## Honest to God – Tough Questions from the Psalms (Part 8 of 8)

“How Shall We Sing the Lord’s Song?”

Psalm 137

Mark Vroegop

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*<sup>1</sup> By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. <sup>2</sup> On the willows there we hung up our lyres. <sup>3</sup> For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” <sup>4</sup> How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land? <sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! <sup>6</sup> 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! <sup>7</sup> Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, “Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!” <sup>8</sup> O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! <sup>9</sup> Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! (Psalm 137 (ESV) .*

Today we bring to a close our summer series on tough questions from the Psalms. Over the last eight weeks, we’ve looked at some really good, hard, and honest questions from this book that we love so much. Here’s where we’ve been:

- Why do you hide yourself? (Psalm 10)
- Why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22)
- What is the measure of my days? (Psalm 39)
- Why are you downcast, O my soul? (Psalm 42)
- Why should I fear in times of trouble? (Psalm 49)
- How long, O Lord? (Psalm 79)
- Where is your steadfast love? (Psalm 89)

It has been a great study – one that has been really helpful for my own soul. Over and over we saw that life is hard, the psalms are honest, and God is good. The psalms not only help us cope with pain; they help us cling to God’s promises. That is why we love them.

Over the next five weeks, and in conjunction with LIVE|12, we’ll be examining the issue of how to defeat sin. “Licensed to Kill” is our title, and the mortification of sin will be our theme. We will be studying some of signature biblical texts that deal with this important topic, and my prayer is that we learn to take sin more seriously, fight it more consistently, and live more victoriously. It is going to be a great journey, and I hope you’ll be here with a friend and engaged in a LIVE|12 group.

## Longing for Judgment

Our final psalm takes up the issue of injustice and the longing for God to do something in the future to balance the scales. It is a psalm that longs for divine intervention and retribution. The psalmist is pained by the inequity that he sees and longs for God to do something. He looks at a world that is filled with things that do not fit with God's goodness, and he longs for the day when it will all be made right.

This psalm says and asks things that make us a bit uncomfortable. Our culture is much more accepting of forgiveness and reconciliation – which is an important and prevalent theme in the Scriptures. But this has also led many people to downplay the other side of the coin: God's judgment.

Trevin Wax has an excellent article in this month's edition of *Christianity Today* on the subject of future judgment ("Rejoicing in Wrath – Why we look forward to Judgment Day"). He cites John Lennon's 1971 song "Imagine" as a great contemporary example of our cultural worldview when it comes to the final judgment.

*Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Living for today*

*Imagine there's no countries  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace*

*You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will be as one*

John Lennon's belief is shared by many people who imagine that no heaven, no hell, no religion would allow us to be "one." But Wax puts his finger on the problem with this view when he says, "You cannot have perfect justice without judgment. God cannot make things right without declaring certain things wrong. It is the judgment that leads to a perfectly just world. Try to take one with other,

*and you lose the Good News.*<sup>1</sup> In other words, judgment is not only necessarily and vital; it can actually be something longed for. So let's see how this works out in Psalm 137.

### **A Painful Request**

Once again we see the context for this psalm is the Babylonian captivity, a seventy-year period where the nation was devastated and people were deported. Part of the military strategy was to displace people and assimilate them into the Babylonian culture so that insurrections would be less likely and the people would be instructed in "the Babylonian way."

This was the background of Daniel and his three friends in Daniel 1. They were part of the ruling class of families, and the goal was to "teach them the literature and the language of Chaldeans" (Dan 1:4). It was a three-year plan which included the changing of their names, their diet, and their thinking. The goal was some level of pluralism and integration into Babylonian culture. Sometimes this integration did not work well. Remember the furnace of fire? Or Daniel and the lion's den? During other seasons, the integration was more amicable.

Verse one would seem to indicate that this psalm was written during a dark and difficult season. Perhaps it was written early in the years of Babylonian captivity when the pain of what had happened during the siege, the destruction of Jerusalem, and ensuing deportation is fresh on the minds of the Jewish people.

*By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion (Psalm 137:1).*

The psalmist aims to paint a picture here for us. Babylon was known for a number of technological advances and features, one of which was a system of irrigation canals that spread across a large plain. It may be that this scene is meant to identify both the might of Babylon and how foreign it was to the people of Judah. Interestingly, the waters of Babylon are a place where God meets with His prophets. Ezekiel (Ez. 1:3) and Daniel (Dan. 8:2) both have visions while beside the canals. These usual "waters" were a constant reminder as to how different life really was. Think of it like culture shock. As the psalmist is by these waters in a foreign land, he weeps as he recalls the state of his nation.

Notice that he doesn't say "Jerusalem" or "Judah" or "Israel." Instead, he chose to use the name "Zion." This name came to be the affectionate name that people would use to describe the city of Jerusalem, the temple, and the City of David. This was especially true in poetic literature. You get a sense of this in Psalm 48:2 – *beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King ((Psalm 48:2).* "Zion" is an emotional name for Jerusalem, a term of affection and pride. So when he thinks of "Zion," his heart aches, and his eyes well up with tears. The glorious city in which God's very presence dwelt is in ruins, and the people of God have been forcibly removed from their promised land. It is a sad picture.

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<sup>1</sup> Trevin Wax, "Rejoicing in Wrath – Why we look forward to Judgment Day," (Christianity Today, July/August 2012), 48-51.

With all this grief there really is no reason to sing. Therefore, he says that they have hung up their lyres on the willows there (v 2). A lyre was a six-to-eight-stringed instrument that a person would pluck with his or her fingers in a similar manner to playing a harp. It was an instrument associated with festive, happy, or worshipful occasions. It was an instrument of celebration.

To make matters worse, the psalmist is asked by his captors to play some of the celebration songs connected to their Jewish heritage. Verse 3 is painful to hear. Notice the irony of captors who require song and tormentors who requests song of mirth. <sup>3</sup> *For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" (Psalm 137:3).* There appears to be a level of cruelty here as the soldiers mocked their captives. In the excavations of Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, there is a mural of three prisoners of war who are being forced to march while playing harps.<sup>2</sup> It reminds me of the environment of Auschwitz as Jewish musicians were forced to play classical music as the concentration camp prisoners were marched out to their gruesome work projects.

Let's put all of this together. The psalmist's heart is breaking over the destruction of a city that represented everything to him. He feels displaced and is deeply disturbed over what has happened. And while he is still grieving, the very people who have caused him pain treat him in a way that is cruel. The irony of this situation must have been incredibly painful. So it is not just that bad things have happened, and it is not just that the same people seem to have "gotten away with it"; the issue here is the inconsiderate irony and cruelty embedded in the request to sing some of the songs of Zion. The mockery is obvious and cruel.

It is sad to think about but I can only imagine that some of you can really relate to the Psalmist's feelings. We live in a broken world with a lot of unfair things that take place. And sometimes these unfair things happen at the hands of people who not just unkind; they are actually cruel.

It is a sad scene that we see here in Psalm 137 and one that I'm sure some of you can relate to.

### **Defiant Love**

In the next section of verses (4-6), we get a window into the heart of the psalmist as he recounts his resistance to bending to the desires of his captors. We hear him talk to himself about his love for the people of God, and we hear a defiant hope that he will not forget Jerusalem. While there are limitations on how much he can actively resist, the internal conversation is very much slanted toward a deep-seated resistance.

In verse 4 he asks a pejorative question: *"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"* The psalmist is struggling here with the contrast between the songs of Zion and the reality of their plight. This was no time for singing the joyful songs that celebrated the rule of God. His heart was too full of grief, and singing these songs would only make it worse. He couldn't sing these songs.

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<sup>2</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150 – Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, (Downer's Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 459.

But there is more to this than just grief. The psalmist seems to indicate that to sing the songs of Zion while in Babylon would be an act of forgetfulness. It is almost as if he believes that to sing them now, while they are in Babylon, would be to treat Jerusalem and the memory of her glory with contempt. Just listen to what he says here:

*<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! <sup>6</sup> 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! (Psalm 137:5–6).*

To sing these songs right now when Jerusalem lies in ruins would be painful, and it would make light of the terrible situation that had befallen the people of God. Joyful songs just didn't fit; they would be totally inappropriate. He'd rather lose his musical ability than sing songs that make a mockery of what has happened.

Therefore, the psalmist is defiant in his love for the city of God. To sing a song of Zion in light of what has happened just doesn't make sense. He is grieving, and he is longing for a better day.

### **Longing for Justice**

So what do you do when you seem to be in an unchanging, unfair and deeply painful scenario? Where do you go with the emotions that you feel? What do you say? The remaining three verses (7-9) are a great example of why we love the psalms and why they are so helpful.

These verses long for justice to be done. The psalmist is personally helpless; he is a captive in foreign land. He is powerless to change the circumstances in his life. So he does the only thing that he can do: he cries out to God. His words are honest, painful, and a bit troubling.

*<sup>7</sup> Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, "Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!" <sup>8</sup> O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! <sup>9</sup> Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! (Psalm 137:7–9).*

Verse seven is directed toward the people of Edom. They were the descendants of Esau and lived to the south. At the invasion of Jerusalem, the Edomites did nothing to help or assist the nation of Israel since they were already the vassals of Babylon. Instead they rejoiced in the destruction of Jerusalem, seeing it as an opportunity for national advancement. Here is what the prophet Obadiah said them:

*<sup>11</sup> On the day that you stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them. <sup>12</sup> But do not gloat over the day of your brother in the day of his misfortune; do not rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their ruin; do not boast in the day of distress (Obadiah 11–12).*

Edom rejoiced in the downfall of their neighbors, and the psalmist asks for judgment over them because of their lack of compassion.

He next turns to Babylon, the ultimate source of his angst. He longs for the day when justice will be delivered. He aches for the time when the scales of “fairness” will be balanced, a day promised in God’s word.

*<sup>8</sup> O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! (Psalm 137:8).*

The plea is based upon the principle of just “repayment” for crimes (see Deut. 19:19ff) and God’s word as communicated through the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 51:56) that God would repay the Babylonians for their cruelty.

Verse nine is particularly graphic and reflects the Psalmist’s white-hot pain: *<sup>9</sup> Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! (Psalm 137:9).* What do we say about this kind of statement?

First, the psalmist is merely echoing the specific promises that God himself made regarding the total judgment of Babylon. Isaiah 13 is an oracle against Babylon, and in that text we find the following punishment:

*<sup>16</sup> Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished. <sup>17</sup> Behold, I am stirring up the Medes against them, who have no regard for silver and do not delight in gold. <sup>18</sup> Their bows will slaughter the young men; they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb; their eyes will not pity children. <sup>19</sup> And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans, will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them (Isaiah 13:16–19).*

So the psalmist is not simply reflecting his own rage. He is longing for promised judgment.

Secondly, while his emotions are very strong and graphic, his appeal is for God to bring judgment, not for his own personal revenge. This is the psalm of a man who is longing for God to act, and he is pouring out his heart with all the pain that comes from great injustice. Yet he is not taking matters into his own hands.

This prayer is gut-wrenching request to have the enemies of God’s people reap what they have sown. The psalmist is pleading with God to make wrong right. He longs for the day of ultimate justice. His hope, while in deep pain, is that one day God will fix this mess.

## **The Hope of Judgment**

There is something very hopeful about future judgment. This psalm is in the Bible for good reason. Since most of us know what it is like to be treated unfairly, and since far too many know what it is like to have endured abuse, this psalm speaks to a relevant and deeply personal issue. So what is the hope of future judgment? Why is future judgment something we should rejoice in?

### **1. It demonstrates the holiness of God**

There is no other quality that captures God’s essence better than his holiness. Isaiah 6 describes God as holy, holy, holy. And this divine purity is what defines his existence and holds the universe

together. God's role as judge is an affirmation that He is really and truly holy. Without judgment there is no holiness, and without holiness there is no real hope.

*"The god who is truly scary is not the wrathful God of the Bible, but the god who closes his eyes to the evil of this world, shrugs his shoulders, and ignores it in the name of "love." What kind of love is this? A god who is never angered at sin and who lets evil go by unpunished is not worthy of worship. The problem isn't that the judgmentless god is too loving; it's that he isn't loving enough."<sup>3</sup>*

## **2. It makes unfairness tolerable**

Somewhere in your teenage years you begin to learn that life is not fair. Growing up means that you come face to face with the reality that Dad can't fix everything, duct tape has its limits, and people do mean things that they seem to get away with. To live in a world where there is no judgment would dramatically increase our pain. Further, it would increase the scope of the evil of what people will do if they believe that there is no God and there is no judgment. The reality of future judgment means that hurting and suffering people can *"keep entrusting themselves to the One who judges justly"* (1 Peter 2:23). While bad things happen and life is hard, evil does not win. The reality of judgment makes the unfairness of life tolerable.

*"Humans are united by a desire for justice. We realize that life isn't fair. And yet for some reason, we think that it should be fair. The Bible teaches that life isn't fair now, and yet Scripture still points to a day when wrongs will be righted and justice will be served. God will straighten things out once and for all. That is why the idea of Christ's return in judgment brings comfort. To those who suffer at the hands of the unjust it is comforting to hold to the promise that one day all will be made right. This upside-down, crazy world will not go on in its current state forever. God will execute justice. The righteousness of God will be evident for all to see, and "the knowledge of the Lord will flood the earth as the waters cover the sea."<sup>4</sup>*

## **3. It releases you from the trap of revenge**

Have you ever taken your own revenge, gave someone some of "his own medicine," or took your pound of flesh? You know that for a moment it felt good, but did it ultimately satisfy? The problem with taking our own revenge is that it never really reaches the level of what we have felt. That is why revenge often escalates things. Someone hits you; you hit back harder. Revenge doesn't resolve the pain. Revenge never fully balances the scales. That is why the Bible says *"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Rom 12:19)*. Justice is something only God can truly bring.

Knowing that God will take care of the justice issues, releases you to not be trapped in bitterness, resentment, and a lifetime of seeking to get even. By laying it at God's feet, you are able instead to *"love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:44)*. Knowing that God takes care of justice makes you free from the trap of revenge.

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<sup>3</sup> Trevin Wax, 51.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

#### **4. It reminds you about your own culpability**

An appeal to God's judgment is a double-edged sword. By appealing to God's judgment we are all reminded of the high cost of sin and our issues that would require an act of justice. I'm sure that the Psalmist was fully aware that everything he was experiencing at the hands of the Babylonians was part of God's judgment on Israel. So the judgment that we long to happen in lives of others also serves as a reminder of our sinfulness and personal culpability. Galatians 6:1 captures this well: *"Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted"* (Gal. 6:1). Judgment longed for because of personal injustice reminds us of our own crimes against God and others.

#### **5. It is the basis of the good news**

In some respects judgment is a central message of the entire Bible. The Apostle Paul even linked the gospel and judgment in Romans 2. He said, *"on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus"* (Rom. 2:16). The Good News of the Bible involves judgment. The Gospel message is that God has taken our judgment for sin and poured it out on Jesus. So all sin is judged – every single sin. The unbelievable message of the Bible is that God grants forgiveness from judgment, and He does it through and in Christ. The reality of the judgment of sin makes the gospel glorious and the news incredible.

What's more, we long for the good news to have its full effect. We wait for the day when our King will come and once and for all make everything new. Our longing for personal vindication makes us wait with greater urgency – *"Come Lord Jesus, Come!"*

Psalms 93:16 captures the joy expressed in this future hope: *"<sup>13</sup> before the LORD, for he comes, for he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in his faithfulness (Psalm 96:13).*

So when you find yourself suffering injustice, you need a biblical understanding of judgment. When people treat you unfairly, and especially when they treat you cruelly, you need to hear the promise of a day when God will balance the scales. And when it seems unbearable and terribly unfair, we need to rehearse the gospel because it is at the cross that God's judgment on sin is satisfied, giving us the hope of forgiveness and the promise that there will be a day when the universal presence of evil will be conquered once and for all.

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