

How to Pray when you are Angry

Psalm 137

Sermon for May 14, 2023

Pastor Chris Sicks

This week we are looking at Psalm 137 for our sermon series:

"How the Psalms Teach us to Pray."

Psalm 137 has some verses that are painful to read and hard to understand.

But my job as your pastor is to teach the entire Bible--including the difficult parts.

There are three people groups mentioned in this psalm.

The authors are from Jerusalem, which is sometimes called Zion.

But when they wrote this prayer, the authors were captives in Babylon.

In July 587 BC, Babylon completely destroyed Jerusalem and tore down God's temple.

King Zedekiah watched the Babylonians kill his sons.

Then they cut out the king's eyes and took him to Babylon with most of the Jewish people.

Some of them wrote Psalm 137.

The other people group mentioned are the Edomites--descendants of Esau, the grandson of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac had twin boys named Esau and Jacob.

Even when they were in the womb, Esau and Jacob struggled against each other.

God told their mother Rebekah that her sons would become two nations.

God changed Jacob's name to Israel.

Then for hundreds of years, the nations of Israel and Edom struggled and fought, like their fathers did as children.

You will see in today's psalm that the Edomites did something terrible when Babylon came to destroy Jerusalem.

And you will hear in the last verse a terrible cry of anger from the authors.

I hope by studying this passage we will learn together what to do with our own anger.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, from Psalm 137.

1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

2 There on the poplars we hung our harps,

3 for there our captors asked us for songs,

our tormentors demanded songs of joy;

they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord

while in a foreign land?

5 If I forget you, Jerusalem,

may my right hand forget its skill.

6 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.

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.

Together we read Isaiah 40:8:

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Please pray with me.

Father in heaven, there are some things in your Word that are hard to understand.

But Jesus, you are the living Word, so help us focus our eyes on you.

And Holy Spirit, we depend on you to open our hearts and minds to the Word.

Help us now, to understand and believe.

We pray in the name of Jesus our Savior, amen.

I'm going to walk us through the verses of Psalm 137 in order, so we will come to those painful last sentences in a few minutes.

Let's look first at verses 1-3:

1 "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

2 There on the poplars we hung our harps,

3 for there our captors asked us for songs,

our tormentors demanded songs of joy;

they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

The authors describe their life after they were captured by the Babylonian army.

They weep when they remember watching the Babylonian army destroy Jerusalem.

But now those same Babylonians asked for entertainment.

They "demanded songs of joy" from shattered, traumatized people.

The Israelites couldn't do it.

They couldn't sing with joy any song that reminded them of home.

So they hung up their harps on the trees.

Next, verses 4-6 express deep anguish over their present circumstances, and also loyalty to God:

4 "How can we sing the songs of the Lord

while in a foreign land?

5 If I forget you, Jerusalem,

may my right hand forget its skill.

6 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."

Can you feel the grief and trauma in their hearts?

They miss home so much that they cannot sing a clear note.

Many of you are far from your home country.

Many of you left behind mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers.

Some of you will never return to your home countries, because of the persecution you experienced there.

When I hear your stories of sacrifice and loss, it helps me understand verses like these.

Your stories help me feel the deep grief and heartache these authors felt 2,500 years ago.

The other deep emotion expressed here is loyalty.

It would be disloyal to sing songs from God's temple while in the city of Babylon.

This is a little ironic, because God's people were often disloyal.

The reason God sent the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem was that his people broke their covenant promises.

They were disloyal, however God punished them in love, so he could save them.

God's punishment renewed their commitment to be loyal and worship God alone.

In captivity they remembered that God alone is their true source of security and joy.

Now let's look at verse 7 together:

7 "Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did

on the day Jerusalem fell.

"Tear it down," they cried,

"tear it down to its foundations!"

When Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, the authors' pain was doubled because the Edomites encouraged the destruction.

They took Babylon's side, against their cousins in Jerusalem.

The Edomites had no fear of God, no loyalty to their ancestor Abraham.

About 500 years after this, a descendent of these Edomites became King of Israel.

Maybe you recognize his name: Herod the Great.

King Herod was a wicked man who did not fear God.

When Herod heard the report that Jesus the Messiah was born, he tried to tear him down.

To keep his grip on power, Herod ordered the massacre of all boys two years or younger in Bethlehem.

I mention this as a reminder that our Savior Jesus Christ was born under the shadow of great evil.

King Herod and Roman soldiers controlled the political life of Israel during the life of Jesus.

And power-hungry religious leaders controlled the religious life of Israel.

Jesus chose to be born into that world.

Why?

Because the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are God's answer to evil.

I'll say more about that in a few minutes.

First, let's look at the last two verses of today's psalm.

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."

There is no moral justification for this final verse, of course.

We must not try to become comfortable with these words.

This is raw emotion, it is an evil response to an evil experience.

The Edomites encouraged the Babylonians to bring total destruction upon Jerusalem.

In response, the authors want to see the total destruction of Babylon.

Thankfully, these exiles from Jerusalem did not start killing children in Babylon.

They spoke honestly about the pain in their deeply traumatized hearts.

Their hearts cried out for revenge "according to what you have done to us."

But if we match evil with evil, we unite our hearts with our enemy.

God's word does not tell us that all anger is sin, but that anger can easily lead us into sin.

Listen to Ephesians 4:26-27.

26 "Be angry and do not sin;

do not let the sun go down on your anger,

27 and give no opportunity to the devil."

Satan wants to drag us down into a pit of cruel sin with our enemies.

The pain in our hearts call for revenge, and Satan echoes that call.

These authors turned instead to God in prayer.

They prayed to God all the sinful, ugly desire for violence that was in their hearts.

They wanted to see the Babylonians suffer as much as they suffered.

But instead of doing evil themselves, the authors prayed and trusted God to do what is right.

The first martyr of the Christian church was named Stephen.

He was stoned to death, for speaking the truth about the resurrection of Jesus.

But look at how he prays in Acts 7:59-60.

59 "While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed,

"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

60 Then he fell on his knees and cried out,

"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

When he had said this, he fell asleep."

How did Stephen learn that kind of mercy and compassion for people who were killing him?

He learned it from his Savior.

This is what Jesus prayed on the cross, with nails in his hands:

“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34)

At the moment Jesus said that, he was looking at the men who nailed him to the cross.

But he was looking at all of us, too.

Because it was my sin that put him on that cross, and your sin.

My friends, Jesus died to forgive sinners like us, who stubbornly reject God's laws and try to live our own way.

But when we confess our sin and believe that Christ died in our place, we receive new life.

We also receive new power to respond to evil the way our Savior did.

That's how Stephen could pray for his enemies, while the stones rained down on his head.

Today's message is a short answer to a big question:

"How to pray when you are angry."

I have five suggestions for you, that come from the Word of God.

When we encounter difficult passages like Psalm 137, we need to interpret them through other parts of scripture.

That is one of the most important principles of understanding the Bible.

When one part of God's Word is difficult to understand, other parts of God's Word will make it clear.

My first suggestion for how to pray when you are angry:

1) Do not return sin for sin.

Do not take vengeance into your own hands.

Don't wound others because of your own wounded feelings.

The apostle Paul was constantly attacked because he preached the truth about Jesus Christ.

He was chained in prison, beaten, and nearly stoned to death.

But listen to Paul's instructions to us in Romans 12:17-21.

17 "Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath;

for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

20 On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;

if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Second suggestion:

2) Do not stuff your feelings inside.

If you bury your anger down in your heart it will become bitterness or rage.

Your dark feelings will grow underground--they will not disappear.

Listen to Psalm 32:3-4.

3 "When I kept silent, my bones wasted away

through my groaning all day long.

4 For day and night your hand was heavy on me;

my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer."

When David suppressed his feelings, he grew weak.

Burying his emotions only made him feel worse.

Many of us think it is better to suppress our anger.

We have seen angry people lose control and hurt others.

But anger is not always sinful.

We should be glad that God gets angry about sin and injustice.

We don't want an indifferent God who buries his anger and ignores our suffering.

God's anger means that he cares.

A good and holy God cannot overlook or excuse evil.

The gospel is good news because God poured out his righteous anger on his Son instead of us.

If Jesus is your Lord and Savior, you can pray in his name to the Father when you are angry.

That's my third suggestion.

3) Don't stuff your anger down inside, pour it out to God in prayer.

Tell him how you honestly feel, as David reminds us in Psalm 62:8.

8 "Trust in him at all times, you people;

pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge."

Sometimes we think that our prayers need to be polite and edited to remove anything ugly.

But God doesn't want you to edit your prayers and remove your dark emotions.

God wants your heart.

He knows that evil and pain will only grow if you keep them buried inside.

Even if you are angry toward God, tell him that in prayer.

It's okay!

Begin the conversation and see how he responds.

Prayer opens your heart and mind so the Holy Spirit can do his work in you.

Listen to what Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6-7.

6 "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation,

by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding,
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Fourth suggestion:

4) Instead of praying against our enemies we pray for them.

This is the hardest part.

I don't know what tragedies you have experienced in your life.

I don't know what evil people have done to you.

But I do know that deep wounds make it very difficult to love our enemies and pray for them.

However, Christians cannot end our prayers the way Psalm 137 ends.

These authors prayed against their enemies.

Jesus calls us to pray for our enemies instead.

Matthew 5:43-44:

43 "You have heard that it was said:

'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

44 But I say to you, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

Don't misunderstand what Jesus is saying.

God will not ignore or overlook evil.

Our enemies deserve judgment and punishment for their sins.

Every sin that has ever been committed must be punished.

God's punishment will either fall on you, or on Jesus.

How many of your sins were forgiven by Jesus on the cross?

Can you count them?

Our anger about the sins of others can cloud our eyes, making it hard to see our own sin.

The ground is level at the foot of the cross, my friends.

The salvation that God offers to us is also available to our enemies.

Therefore we pray that He will bring our enemies to repentance.

We hope the Lord will soften their hearts so they repent.

If they do not, then he will punish them with all his righteous anger.

When we pray for our enemies, we are handing them over to God.

We are getting off the judge's bench, and trusting God to save or to punish.

Praying for people who have hurt you is very difficult.

We must depend on God to do what God asks.

That's why I share this fifth suggestion:

5) Come to worship, and attend a Life Group regularly.

When we are wounded or angry we need to gather with God's people.

Sometimes our sorrow and pain make us want to withdraw from community, but we must do the opposite.

In Psalm 137:4, the authors asked:

4 "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?"

But they asked that question in a song!

They did not feel like singing, but then they poured those feelings into a song.

Romans 12:15 says:

15 "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."

Bring your problems and pain with you on Sunday nights and to your Life Group.

When we focus our attention on God and his Word, we invite him into our hearts.

We also get encouragement from one another that we cannot get alone.

Every week in this room there are people full of joy and gratitude, and others full of pain and fear.

We need one another.

Hebrews 10:24-25 tells us:

24 "And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,

25 not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,

but encouraging one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Thank you, dear friends, for your attention to God's Word on a difficult topic.

There is much more that could be said about anger, and God's response to injustice.

For now, let's pray together to our heavenly Father, using the words that Jesus taught us.

Let's pray it together slowly, thinking about all the words.

You may pray in your own language, or with me in English.

"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done,

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

and forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For Yours is the kingdom, and the power,

and the glory, forever and ever, Amen."