

psalm 137

psalm of lament and exile
translation by Robert Alter and NRSV

- ¹ By Babylon's canals,
 there we sat, oh we wept,
 when we remembered Zion.
- ² On the willows there
 we hung up our harps.
- ³ For there our captors had asked of us for songs,
 and our plunderers—rejoicing:
 “Sing to us one of Zion's songs!”
- ⁴ How can we sing a song of the LORD on foreign soil?
- ⁵ Should I forget you, Jerusalem,
 may my right hand wither.
- ⁶ May my tongue cleave to my palate
 if I do not remember you,
 if I do not set Jerusalem above my chief joy.
- ⁷ Recall, O LORD, the Edomites,
 saying on the day of Jerusalem...
 “Raze it, raze it, to its foundation!”
- ⁸ O Daughter of Babylon the Devastator,
 Happy who pays you back in kind,
 for what you did to us.
- ⁹ Happy who seizes and smashes
 your infants against the rock.

your prayer

prompts for psalm 137

Reading the Psalm

- When and where was this psalm written? Why is this significant?
- What emotions are in this psalm? What are your emotions reading this psalm?
- Because such violence is in the Holy Bible, does that make it okay?

Letting the Psalm Read You and Our Community

- Have you ever felt like you were—or are—in exile, living in a strange land, far from God and home?
- How can it be appropriate to pray a psalm filled with such hatred and anger? Does this give us permission to curse someone?
- What do we do with hatred and anger? Should we put it in our hymnal and sing about it? Vent and grieve and forget about it? How do we pray when we are so angry?
- What vows can we make, as individuals, as a community, to never forget something, to never repeat something wrong?
- What brokenness and brutalities in our community—and in this world—should not be ignored or covered up? Remember those in prayer.
- Is such frank honesty appropriate in public settings as it is in personal prayer?

Remembering

With the psalmist we remember Zion (our own captivity), we remember our enemies. We vow never again to forget. We call to the Lord to remember us at the same time that the Lord asks us to remember him. With the psalmist we confront senseless and brutal violence.

When we are tempted to only remember violence, to only remember the destruction of our home, Christ says instead “Remember me. This is my body, broken for you, smashed against the rocks for you. This is my blood, spilled for you, exiled for you. Drink this bread and this wine, and remember me.”

Write a fifth stanza to the psalm remembering Christ and Christ’s sacrifice in His body and blood which has become our communion. Where is Jesus in your own exile?

praying a psalm

Dwelling in the Psalm

- The goal of praying a psalm is to seek God's voice and presence through the psalm—it is *not* to write a scholarly commentary afterwards.
- Read the psalm all the way through. It's okay if you find yourself stopping in a certain place. Dwell there, listen to what God might be saying to you through that part, or what you might need to say to God. Try reading out loud.
- This isn't the time for analysis. Read the psalm like you might watch a sunset... drink it in, rest, breathe deeply. Read what the psalm has to say to you with trust and expectation.
- You are listening to the voice of God through the voice of the psalmist. God may speak in many different ways: through words, through verses of the psalm, through images, through a memory. Might be hard to hear God at first, but as we pray together over the next few weeks, I hope that God's voice in these psalms becomes clearer to you.
- Pay attention to the phrases and images that resonate with your life.

Focusing on the Psalm

- Look at repeated words. Is there anything important happening with those words in the psalm—and in your heart?
- Look at the structure of the psalm. Is there any significance in how the psalm begins and where the psalm ends? Is there an emotional journey? Does it resonate with your own life's journey? Are there different sections to the psalm?
- Do you agree or disagree with parts of the psalm? Why?

Responding to the Psalm

- Re-read the psalm. After each verse or section, acknowledge God's voice in those words, speak to God, and write your own responses.
- Write. Speak. Sing. Draw. Listen.
- How is this psalm your own prayer? How can you pray for your friends and family, loved ones and enemies?