

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

DIFFICULT WORDS, BUT TRUE

Psalm 137

By

Steven J. Cole

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Psalms: Lesson 24

Difficult Words, But True Psalm 137

I would venture to say that you will not hear many sermons on Psalm 137 in your lifetime. It's not the kind of psalm that lends itself to easy preaching. Some texts are fun to preach because they're obviously helpful and easy to apply. Not Psalm 137. It contains difficult words.

In fact, verse 9 is probably the most difficult verse in the book of Psalms. It shocks us. It's a verse that may cause some to doubt the inspiration of the Bible. How can the Bible be inspired by a God of love when it contains a verse like, "How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock"? How can such a verse be reconciled with Jesus' command to love our enemies?

Psalm 137 is one of several psalms called imprecatory psalms. In these psalms, the author (usually David, although not in Ps. 137) invokes God to bring down judgment or punishment on his enemies. Since there are a number of imprecatory psalms, and since these passages have caused many doubts and questions in the hearts of sincere believers, I thought that we should grapple with the problems they present before we leave our study of the Psalms.

At the outset, I must say that there is no simple, concise solution to the problems raised by such psalms. Usually I try to boil my thoughts down to one statement which gives you my main idea. I can't do that today. You're going to have to roll up your sleeves and do some hard thinking!

First, I want to try to explain this type of psalm; and then I want to show you some practical lessons which can be drawn from Psalm 137.

Explanation: How do we explain the imprecatory psalms?

There are three approaches we must take to understand the imprecatory psalms: We must view them in light of God's purposes; in light of the psalmist's attitude; and, in light of New Tes-

tament revelation. None of these by itself will give a complete answer, but hopefully all three woven together will clarify the solution.

1. We must view the imprecatory psalms in light of God's purposes.

There are three broad purposes of God which, when understood, help us to see why the psalmist would invoke God to call down such awful judgments:

- A. God purposes to punish sin and reward righteousness.

God is righteous and just. Indeed, He would not be God at all if He were not. Since God has revealed Himself to His creation as righteous and just, it is necessary that He punish sin and reward righteousness. If men could commit horrible crimes and never pay or if nations were allowed to perpetrate atrocities and never be called to account, we could rightly conclude that there is no righteous God in heaven. There comes a point at which not to judge sin would be to condone it. And so God must judge sin.

He does this in two ways. First, there will be a *future judgment* on all nations and on every person. This period in the Bible is called "the day of the Lord." God's Word is abundantly clear on this point (e.g., 2 Thess. 1:6-9). Even though sinners seem to prosper now, a day of judgment is coming. None outside of Christ will escape His wrath. Every sinner must stand before the bar of God's justice.

Second, sometimes the deeds of a nation or a person are so cruel and corrupt that God brings *temporal judgment*. To allow certain atrocities to go unpunished would violate the moral fiber of the universe and encourage other evil people to perpetrate similar evils. In such cases, the temporal judgment is not the final judgment, but it brings the particular evil reign to its end on earth.

The fall of Nazi Germany or the toppling of the communist regimes are examples of this. The fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 on account of their rejection of Jesus as Messiah is another example. I believe that our nation currently stands in grave danger of God's judgment because of our immorality and violence, unless there is widespread repentance and revival. We need to understand that God's timing is not our timing. When temporal judgment is with-

held, it is because, in His grace and patience, God is offering the opportunity to repent. But if grace is spurned long enough, temporal judgment will fall.

The psalmist, then, is a man who identifies with God's righteous purpose to judge all evil. So he cries out for God to act. It is a cry every righteous person can identify with.

B. God purposes to bless the earth through His chosen people.

God's plan is to bless all families on the earth through Abraham's seed, which refers broadly to the nation Israel and specifically to the Messiah, who is a direct descendant of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3). Just as God's purpose to punish sin and reward righteousness is a revelation of His righteous character, so His purpose to bless the earth through His chosen people is a revelation of His love and mercy.

The entire human race has rebelled against God. He could have righteously judged us all. But because of His love and mercy, He purposed to bless us through His plan of salvation. To prepare the world for the coming of Messiah, God chose Abraham and his descendants through Jacob. The nation Israel was to be a people under God's rule. To such a people, God would send the Savior of the world.

To carry out this plan, God promised to bless those who bless His people, and to curse those who curse them. When the psalmist cries out for judgment on Babylon, he is appealing to God to carry out His covenant with Abraham so that ultimately all peoples would be blessed. Even though God's chosen nation had sinned and was reaping God's temporal judgment through the Babylonian captivity, the psalmist is asking God to overturn that judgment by cursing the nation that had cursed them, in line with God's greater purpose to bless the world through the seed of Abraham.

C. God purposes to fulfill His Word.

God's Word can and must be trusted. When God says that something will happen, you can count on it. Just as God's purpose to punish sin reveals His *righteousness* and His purpose to bless the earth through His chosen people reveals His *love*, so His purpose to

fulfill His Word reveals His *faithfulness*. You can trust God to do what He promises.

What had God promised concerning Babylon? He promised to fully repay Babylon and to level its walls (Jer. 51:56, 58). Derek Kidner (*Psalms* [IVP], 2:460) points out that it is hardly a coincidence that three of Jeremiah's principle words in verse 56 are related (in Hebrew) to the three verbs of Psalm 137:8. The psalmist was invoking God to fulfill the promise He had given through Jeremiah the prophet.

God's promise to level the walls of Babylon was no small thing! Babylon was surrounded by an outer wall between 42-56 miles in circumference (depending on the source), 11 feet thick, and 75 feet high, with watchtowers and a moat outside it! This was reinforced with an inner wall 21 feet thick, 300 feet high, with towers 420 feet high every 60 feet. And there were other inner walls! (Information from D. J. Wiseman, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, 1:441-442.) Who could imagine that such a mighty city would become a heap of ruins? But God prophesied that it would happen and it did!

Also, in Isaiah 13:16, in the context of a prophecy of God's judgment on Babylon for her sins, Isaiah specifically prophesied that their little ones would be dashed to pieces before their eyes. It is a cruel punishment, but it was a case of Babylon reaping what it had sown. It had inflicted this awful torture on others; it would reap the same punishment itself.

If God has promised something in His Word, He will fulfill it. But He fulfills it in response to the prayers of His people in line with His Word (see Dan. 9:2, 3). Thus when the psalmist invokes God to destroy Babylon, he is asking God to fulfill His prophetic word and thus prove Himself faithful.

Thus an understanding of God's purposes to punish sin and reward righteousness, to bless the earth through His chosen people, and to fulfill His Word through His prophets helps explain the psalmist's harsh words against Babylon.

2. We must view the imprecatory psalms in light of the psalmist's attitude.

We need to consider two aspects of the psalmist's attitude to understand the imprecatory psalms:

- A. The psalmist was not seeking personal vengeance, but rather was asking God to take action.

His prayer was not, "Give me an opportunity to get even with those scoundrels!" Rather it was, "Lord, You avenge the evil done to your people." That is a significant difference. We see this difference in practice when we compare David's imprecatory psalms with his personal actions. He often prayed that God would take action against his enemies. His passion for justice often caused him to be outraged when he heard of injustice and evil (2 Sam. 3:26-39; 4:1-12; 12:1-5). But when he had a chance to kill his personal enemies, such as Saul, he refused to do it.

The imprecatory psalms are not rooted in a spirit of personal vengeance, but rather in a passionate desire for God to vindicate His people by judging the wicked. It is the same kind of righteous anger that would cause us to pray that a murderer or child molester be brought to justice.

- B. The psalmist was not concerned about his own cause, but rather about God's cause.

There is no taint of personal jealousy, spite, or ambition in these psalms. Rather, there is a deep concern for God's people. There is a desire for God's glory to be displayed. In the case of David's imprecations, those who opposed the king opposed God, because the king was God's anointed. In the case of the other imprecatory psalms, they are all national, not personal in character. The psalmists in every case had a deep desire that God's plan might be fulfilled through His people for His glory.

Thus it helps to understand the imprecatory psalms if we view them in light of God's purpose and in light of the psalmist's attitude. He was not seeking vengeance or being selfish. Rather, he was asking God to vindicate His people who had been mistreated and to fulfill His plan through them.

- 3. We must view the imprecatory psalms in light of New Testament revelation.

Some people erroneously think that Jesus abolished or contradicted the Old Testament Law. But Jesus said, "I did not come to abolish [the Law or the prophets], but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17). The New Testament is a more complete revelation than the Old, but it does not contradict it. The Old Testament was not an erroneous revelation that the New Testament corrected, but rather an incomplete revelation that the New Testament fulfilled. To view these psalms in light of the New Testament, we need to understand four things:

- A. Personal vengeance is not taught in either the Old Testament or the New Testament.

Some think that the *lex talionis* (law of retribution, "eye for an eye"; Exod. 21:24-25; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21) meant that personal revenge was prescribed by the Law. The Pharisees in Jesus' day used it that way. But this was not the intent of that law. In fact, it was just the opposite. The "eye for an eye" principle applied to civil law in the sense, "Do not avenge yourself, but let justice be administered." On the personal level, the Law stated (Lev. 19:18), "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord." The apostle Paul quoted from the Old Testament when he commanded Christians not to take vengeance (Rom. 12:19-20; Deut. 32:35; Prov. 25:21).

- B. Judicial punishment of the wicked is taught in the Old Testament and in the New Testament.

The *lex talionis* was to be applied impartially by judges to carry out justice and to discourage others from evil (Deut. 19:20-21). In the New Testament, the authority to punish and avenge evil is given to the state (Rom. 13:3-4). On a broader level, God uses governments to bring about judgment on other nations through war.

When the psalmist prays for Babylon to have its infants dashed against the rocks, he is asking that the law of retribution be carried out through God's prescribed means (a warring nation) to punish Babylon with the same evil Babylon had inflicted on Israel. He is invoking God for the judicial punishment of the wicked.

- C. Love for personal enemies is implicit in the Old Testament and explicit in the New Testament.

As we have seen, the Old Testament forbade revenge. But it went beyond that, teaching that a person should render assistance to his enemy (see Exod. 23:4-5; Prov. 25:21). There are a number of examples of love for one's enemies, such as Joseph's love for his brothers who had sold him into slavery, and David's kindness toward King Saul who was trying to kill him.

In the New Testament, Jesus corrected the common mistaken notion that the law taught hatred for enemies. He showed that the true interpretation of the law requires us to love even our enemies (Matt. 5:44). Paul said to bless those who persecute you (Rom. 12:14). And yet Jesus blasted the Pharisees with strong words (Matthew 23). Paul wished that those who perverted the gospel might be accursed (Gal. 1:8-9). Paul cursed Elymas and called down blindness on him (Acts 13:9-11). On a personal level, Jesus and Paul both showed love for their enemies. But on a judicial level, they called down God's judgment upon men who perverted God's truth. The psalmist is doing the latter when he prays for judgment on Israel's enemies.

- D. In light of the cross, we offer to God's enemies a message of reconciliation if they will repent, but of awful judgment if they will not.

God has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-19). Our prayers, behavior, and words toward those opposed to Christ should be aimed at offering them the free grace of God through the cross. If the chief of sinners could find mercy, none is beyond hope (1 Tim. 1:15-16). But the same blood of Jesus that offers mercy to those who repent brings condemnation to those who refuse to repent (John 3:18, 36). We should never take de-light in the thought of God's judging our enemies, because He does not take pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they repent and live (Ezek. 18:23, 32). If we must warn them of judgment, we should do it with compassion, not with glee.

I trust that viewing the imprecatory psalms in light of God's purpose, the psalmist's attitude, and New Testament revelation helps explain them. But God's Word is profitable not only for teaching, but also for reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. Let's look briefly at ...

Application: How can we practically apply Psalm 137?

There are four practical lessons I'd like to note from Psalm 137. I don't have time to develop them thoroughly, but perhaps they will stimulate you to see the value of even such a difficult passage as this:

1. We should be aroused into viewing the atrocities of sin with a holy horror.

The psalmist is not simply trying to address us, but to shock us into seeing the awfulness of sin. Just as a scream in the night gets our adrenaline flowing and motivates us to action, the psalmist wants us to have an emotional reaction to the sin which has taken place. We are too mild in our hatred of sin. Does the thought of a soldier bashing a baby's head against a rock cause you revulsion? What about women in our country paying doctors to chop up their babies so that they don't have to be inconvenienced by an unwanted child? The abortion industry should anger us and shock us into action. To use violence to fight it is wrong; but so is passivity.

2. We should see that there is total incompatibility between the child of God and the world.

Just as these faithful Jews could not sing Zion's songs in Babylon, so God's people today should not join in the frivolities of the world. The Babylonians might taunt the Jews, but they knew nothing of the solid joys of Zion. The world might taunt the Christian, but it knows nothing of the joys of being a child of God. Even though we live in Babylon, we need to be distinct people.

3. We can stand true to God in the most difficult of circumstances.

The Jews refused to play their harps in Babylon (v. 2). They stood firmly for the Lord, yearning for worship in Jerusalem (vv. 4-6). In spite of their defeat and in spite of Babylon's great power, there could be rebuilding and hope. God's promises do not fail, even when the circumstances seem the blackest. Great Babylon was destroyed. God's people live on! No matter how difficult our situation, we can obey the Lord.

4. We should be challenged to a deeper commitment to God's kingdom and righteousness.

The thought of Jerusalem in ruins brought these Jews to tears. They didn't have it all that bad in Babylon. They easily could have been assimilated into the Babylonian way of life. But they had an intense longing for God's city and God's worship. They would not settle for anything less.

How badly do you want to see God's church established? How earnestly do you yearn for righteousness for yourself and God's people? Could you say, with the psalmist, that you exalt God's church above your highest personal joy (v. 6)? What kind of difficult circumstances would it take to cause you to lay those desires aside? The difficult but true words of Psalm 137 should stir us to cast off our worldliness and apathy and to reaffirm our commitment to the living God and His church.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you answer a critic who said, "Why would a loving God punish innocent babies and children?"
2. Should a Christian pray the imprecatory psalms against those who oppose the gospel?
3. Does God love everyone (see Ps. 5:5-6)? Should we (Ps. 139:21-22)? Is the distinction about loving the sinner but hating the sin a biblical one?
4. Should we emphasize God's love or His judgment to a person opposed to the gospel?

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