

# Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

Bereans Adult Bible Fellowship  
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by  
William D. Barrick, Th.D.  
Professor of OT, The Master's Seminary



## Psalm 137 — Weeping among the Willows

### 1.0 Introducing Psalm 137

- Babylon's destruction, referred to in verse 8, took place in 516 B.C. Therefore, this psalm could be dated after that, if it is a past reference.
- "There" (vv. 1 and 3) seems to indicate that the psalmist is no longer in Babylon.
- The best time period for this psalm would be sometime after the return to Jerusalem (537/536 B.C.) and the completion of the city walls (445 B.C.).
- Only two psalms even mention Babylon: Psalms 87 and 137. Both also mention Zion. Both psalms contain staggering revelation. Psalm 87 shocks the reader by indicating that even those who are Babylonian can truly know God (87:4). Psalm 137 traumatizes the reader by its call for the violent death of Babylonian children.
- Previous imprecatory psalms include Psalms 7, 35, 58, 69, 83, and 109. Notes for these psalms are available at [www.drbarrick.org/sermons](http://www.drbarrick.org/sermons).

### 2.0 Reading Psalm 137 (NAU)

- 137:1** By the rivers of Babylon,  
There we sat down and wept,  
When we **remembered** Zion.
- 137:2** Upon the willows in the midst of it  
We hung our harps.
- 137:3** For there our captors demanded of us songs,  
And our tormentors mirth, *saying*,  
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion."
- 137:4** How can we sing the LORD'S song  
In a foreign land?
- 137:5** If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
May my right hand forget *her skill*.
- 137:6** May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth

If I do not **remember** you,  
If I do not exalt Jerusalem  
Above my chief joy.

**137:7** **Remember**, O LORD, against the sons of Edom  
The day of Jerusalem,  
Who said, “Raze it, raze it  
To its very foundation.”

**137:8** O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one,  
How blessed will be the one who repays you  
With the recompense with which you have repaid us.

**137:9** How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones  
Against the rock.

### 3.0 Understanding Psalm 137

#### 3.1 Outline

- I. The Psalmist’s Painful Recollection (vv. 1–4)
  - A. The Captives’ Condition and Remembrance (vv. 1–2)
  - B. The Captors’ Cruelty and Request (vv. 3–4)
- II. The Psalmist’s Patriotic Dedication (vv. 5–6)
- III. The Psalmist’s Passionate Imprecation (vv. 7–9)
  - A. Recompense against Edom (v. 7)
  - B. Recompense against Babylon (vv. 8–9)



#### 3.2 Notes

- **vv. 1–3** Focus on Misery
  - The first person references (“we,” “us,” “our”) consist of the ending *nû* repeated nine times in the first three verses. In Jewish thinking it is highly emotional. The same kind of repetition occurs in Isaiah 53:4–6.
- **v. 1** “the rivers of Babylon”
  - The region of Babylon had two major rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, as well as a number of canals that ran throughout the southern region between the two rivers. It was a well-watered area that was also referred to as “the wilderness of the sea” in Isaiah 21:1.
    - ✓ For the canals, see Ezekiel 3:15 (Chebar), Ezra 8:21 (Ahava), Daniel 8:2 (Ulai).
    - ✓ Some commentators believe that the Jews might have been forced to help dig the canals and that it was during a break in their labors that they were sitting by the canal they themselves had been digging. See Eric Lane, *Psalms 90–150: The Lord Reigns*, Focus on the Bible (Geanies House, UK: Christian Focus, 2006), 191.

- **v. 1** “When we remembered Zion”
  - The captive Israelites longed for their home, far away from Babylon.
  - Mention of Zion supersedes merely the city and locale of Jerusalem—it brings to mind the fact that God had chosen this place as His dwelling place among men.
- **v. 2** “willows”
  - In happier times the willows provided foliage that the Israelites employed in making booths to celebrate the Feast of Booths (Lev 23:40).
  - The actual tree might be the Euphrates poplar (*Populus euphratica*), which looks more like a willow than a true poplar. — Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 236.
- **v. 2** “We hung our harps”
  - The psalmists associated harps and lyres with praise (Pss 33:2; 57:7–8; 71:22; 92:1–3; 144:9; 150:3). Therefore, hanging their harps on the willows may indicate giving up songs of praise.
- **v. 3** “our captors demanded of us songs”
  - Psalm 106:46 declares that God made the Israelites “*objects of compassion in the presence of all their captors.*”
  - “[I]t happens that a relief from Sennacherib’s palace at Nineveh, in the neighbouring land of Assyria, portrays a situation not unlike this, with three prisoners of war playing lyres as they are marched along by an armed soldier.” — Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 459.
  - “Songs” here is literally “the words of a song” (same phraseology in Judg 5:12).
- **v. 3** “our tormentors”
  - It was painful enough to be removed forcibly from their homes. It was greater agony to be tormented with taunts alluding to their own songs about the security and stability of Zion, which now lay in ruins.
  - The taunts and torment bears comparison with the question “Where is your God?” in Psalms 42:3, 10; 79:10; and 115:2.
  - “Tormentors” is similar in sound to the word “hung” (v. 2), forming a pun or word play. This could indicate that the Babylonians mocked the Israelites for hanging up their harps. See John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 vols., Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 599.
- **v. 3** “the songs of Zion”
  - The songs of Zion include Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, and 122.
  - The beatitude formula is characteristic of a song of Zion (Pss 84:4, 5, 12). Here, that formula is adapted to a curse upon Israel’s tormentors.



- **v. 4** “How can we sing”
  - How very different it is when one’s captivity is not the Lord’s judgment on disobedience! For Israel there was no desire to sing, because their unbelief and disobedience had brought them to Babylon. To sing now would be folly, rather than faith.
  - Paul and Silas sang hymns in prison (Acts 16:25).
  - Compare Matthew 7:6.
- **v. 4** “the LORD’S song” — Compare Psalm 42:8.
- **v. 5** “If I forget”
  - Here is the counterpoint to the threefold mention of “remember.”
- **v. 5** “May my right hand forget”
  - The psalmist utters a self-curse that would deprive him of his own hand and tongue (v. 6)—nothing could be worse for a musician.
  - The self-curse demonstrates humility in contrast to arrogance and sets up the curse to be pronounced on Edom and Babylon.
- **v. 7** “the sons of Edom”
  - A number of passages speak of the judgment to come upon Edom for their hatred and conspiracies against Israel and Jerusalem: Jeremiah 49:7–22; Lamentations 4:21–22; Ezekiel 25:12–14; 35:1–15; Amos 1:11–12; Obadiah 1–21.
- **v. 7** “The day of Jerusalem”
  - Obadiah 10–14 refers to Jerusalem’s “day” of disaster ten times.
- **v. 8** “you devastated one”
  - Babylon will be destroyed—the passive does not specify the agent, but it is clear that it is the Lord Himself who will do so.
- **v. 9** “dashes your little ones against the rock”
  - The problem posed by such an imprecatory declaration involves its relationship to the love and forgiveness demanded of Christians in the New Testament.
  - First, the issue within Psalm 137:
    - ✓ “Remember” (v. 7) establishes a judicial or legal setting calling upon the Lord to fulfill His own Word, to provide justice.
    - ✓ Verses 7–8 indicate that Israel had been victims of the same kind of violence at the hand of the Edomites and the Babylonians.
    - ✓ The psalmist is not taking vengeance into his own hands, but is praying for justice. He addresses his prayer to “the LORD” (v. 7; cp. Rom 12:19).
    - ✓ Only those who have not sinned against their enemies can leave the matter of righteous vengeance to God. The psalmist uttered a curse on himself (vv. 5–6). God promised to use the Israelites to fulfill His wrath against Edom (Ezek 25:14). The psalmist, however, does not ask for this opportunity—perhaps because both he and Israel are unworthy.
  - Second, the issue within the Old Testament:
    - ✓ *Lex talionis* demanded punishment commensurate to the crime (Exod



- 21:23–25; Deut 19:21), but it is not to be applied personally (Prov 24:29).
- ✓ The Lord had revealed that Babylon’s judgment must include dashing their little ones to pieces before their eyes (Isa 13:16).
  - ✓ Jeremiah 51:56 utilizes the same three verbs as Psalm 137:8 (devastate/destroy, repay, recompense) in regard to Babylon’s judgment.
  - ✓ Slaying the children of defeated enemies was a common practice in the ancient Near East (2 Kgs 8:12; 25:7; Hos 10:14; 13:16; Nah 3:10).
- Third, the issue within the New Testament:
- ✓ Jesus announced serious curses upon the unbelieving and hypocritical scribes and Pharisees (Matt 23:13–38).
  - ✓ The apostle Paul proclaimed a curse upon all who do not love the Lord (1 Cor 16:22) and upon all who preach a different gospel (Gal 1:8–9).
  - ✓ The souls of all who are slain for the testimony of Christ will pray for avenging justice (Rev 6:10).
  - ✓ All saints, apostles, and prophets will be called upon to rejoice over the destruction of future Babylon (Rev 18:20). All who are in heaven will shout “Hallelujah!” at Babylon’s lasting devastation (19:3).
- Prayer can provide a means for relinquishing rage—giving it to God and letting go of it.
- ✓ “[I]t is an act of profound faith to entrust one’s most precious hatreds to God, knowing they will be taken seriously.” — Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1984), 77.

#### 4.0 Singing Psalm 137

##### “When We Did Sit in Babylon” (Tune: “Amazing Grace”)



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| <p><b>1</b> When we did sit in Babylon<br/>the rivers round about,<br/>Then in remembrance of Zion<br/>the tears for grief burst out.</p> <p><b>4</b> Alas! said we, who can once frame<br/>his heavy heart to sing<br/>The praises of our living God,<br/>thus under a strange king?</p> <p><b>6</b> And let my tongue within my mouth<br/>be tied for ever fast,<br/>If I rejoice before I see<br/>thy full deliv’rance past.</p> <p><b>9</b> E’en so shalt thou, O Babylon,<br/>at length to dust be brought;<br/>And happy shall that man be called,<br/>that our revenge hath wrought:</p> | <p><b>3</b> Then they to whom we pris’ners were<br/>said to us tauntingly,<br/>Now let us hear your Hebrew songs<br/>and pleasant melody.</p> <p><b>5</b> But yet if I Jerusalem<br/>out of my heart let slide;<br/>Then let my fingers quite forget<br/>the warbling harp to guide:</p> <p><b>7</b> Therefore, O Lord, remember now<br/>the curs-ed noise and cry<br/>That Edom’s sons against us made,<br/>when they razed our city.</p> <p><b>10</b> Yea, bless-ed shall that man be called,<br/>that takes thy little ones,<br/>And dasheth them in pieces small<br/>against the very stones.</p> |
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— Words: Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins et al.,  
*The Whole Book of Psalms* (1812)

## 5.0 Praying Psalm 137

- Father, teach me to weep over the loss of fellowship with You because of my disobedience. [v. 1]
- Lord, teach me the songs to sing in all circumstances. [vv. 2–3]
- Make me understand when my praise is dishonoring to you because of my sin-filled hypocrisy. [v. 4]
- God, make Your presence and Your people my chief joy. [v. 6]
- Lord, help me leave all vengeance to You alone. [vv. 7–9]



## 6.0 Applying Psalm 137

- Even our enemies should be familiar with our songs of praise, because we sing them so often and so openly.
- Our chief joy must be in the Lord and those He has chosen: His people.
- We ought to have a passionate but humble desire for divine justice.
- When attacked, be a prayer first responder.

The just fate of Babylon was repeatedly predicted (Isa. xiii, especially verse 16; xlvii; Jer. i, li), so that, so far from the Psalmist's imprecation being vindictive and revengeful, it is the expression of a declared divine purpose. Even at this late date we often hear expressions of sympathy with criminals rather than with their victims, but mealy-mouthed sentimentalists should face up to the principles of justice.

— W. Graham Scroggie, *The Psalms*, 4 vols. in 1  
(1948; reprint, Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1973), 4:32

From a Nigerian perspective, David Tuesday Adamo comments on the fact that the prominence of prayer for God's punishment of one's enemies in such a psalm troubles Western Christianity but does not so trouble African indigenous churches. Rather than psalms of violence and hate, these are psalms of protection and defense.

— John Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3 vols., Baker Commentary on the Old Testament  
Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 611