

Week 7- Psalm 137: Praying our Anger

1: CONTEXT

A quick look back: Spend a few minutes reviewing the big picture of Psalms from Week One. What kind of literature is the book of Psalms? Who is one of the primary authors? What is the book's main purpose? Where are we in the large story of Scripture? Share some of the main themes or learnings from the past weeks (lament, trust, sin, frustration, journey).

Today's Passage: Today's psalm is a bit of a shocker. This isn't one of those psalms we sing in Friday chapel with hands raised and eyes closed. This is the dark, angry, bitter psalm of people who have been deeply hurt. The people are in exile. They watched the Babylonians destroy their homes, burn their temple, kill and rape their people, and march them far away from the land that God gave them. Then, these very enemies who have destroyed all that they knew and loved ask them to sing one of their snappy songs: "You know, that one about the shepherd or looking at the hills. One of the upbeat ones!" In this bitter state, they compose Psalm 137.

2: CONTENT

Read Psalm 137 out loud and then pick ONE of the following ways (Option A, B, C, or D) to help your group engage with this passage.

Option A. Notice/Wonder: Ask everyone to read the passage again quietly on their own. As they read, ask them to make a list like the one below. Remember that what people notice or wonder can just be small, simple things.

What do I NOTICE about this text?

What do I WONDER about?

Once everyone has had the chance to make their list, come together as a group and share your observations, writing them on a board or a place where everyone can see the list as it develops.

Option B. Creative Engagement: Give everyone paper and drawing supplies. Have everyone read the passage again on their own, then invite them to spend some time illustrating the passage (or a part of the passage) in whatever way they want- concrete, abstract, colors, images, words. When everyone has completed their art, come together and spend time sharing with each other what you drew and why.

Option C. Lectio Divina: Scripture is read four times, pausing after each reading:

1: HEAR the passage.

2: MEDITATE on the passage in the silence that follows.

3: IDENTIFY a word or phrase that stands out to you from the reading (leader may ask group to speak this out loud after the 3rd reading, or to share it as a group after the 4th reading)

4: REST in the presence of God.

Take time to share your reflections with each other as a group.

Option D. Guided Bible Study Questions:

1. How is this psalm of anger different from the psalm of lament that we read several weeks ago? Or more generally, how are anger and lament different? The same? (for leaders: notice there is no "but God/but I know..." in this psalm, and it is not punctuated with questions, like the psalms of lament)
2. What things are causing the psalmist to feel angry? (verses 1, 3, 4)

3. The authors of this psalm clearly want their captors punished for what they have done. But it is important to ask, do THEY want to exact revenge? If not, WHO do they want to deal with their captors?
4. What does Jerusalem/Zion seem to represent to the author?

3: APPLICATION

No matter what method you used for content, spend some time talking about what this passage might mean to us now. Here are some questions to help guide this discussion. Feel free to use several or to just focus on one or two.

- A few weeks ago, we talked about our own experiences with lament- what we had heard/not heard or experienced in our families, churches, faith communities about practicing lament. Talk about that same idea related to anger. What have you learned or heard about the place of anger in the life of a believer? Is anger part of your prayer life? Is it ever part of worship? Should it be?
- How do you normally deal with anger? Do you explode? Withdraw? Try to ignore it? Deny it? What does anger do to you- your heart, your body, your thoughts? Talk about what it might mean, look like, feel like to explore your anger with God.
- The psalmist asks God to deal with the ones causing their anger- “Remember, O Lord...” and they seem to know that He will intervene- “Babylon, doomed to destruction...” Talk about this difference- between wanting personal revenge and wanting/trusting God to set things right. How do you tend to think “things will be made right” in the places you feel deep anger?
- The last line of this psalm is really disturbing. Scholars and historians say that it is very likely that the Babylonians killed the babies of their enemies in this way. So you could read the verse as “Happy is the one who seizes YOUR babies and dashes THEM against the rocks!” Remembering that the psalms are poetry and prayer- and that they often use imagery to evoke emotions, not necessarily portray reality as it is- talk about the *emotion* behind this statement. What are the people of Israel feeling?
 - What situations in your life, the world, this campus, cause you to feel this guttural sense of grief, deep need, anger, despair?
- Why do you think this psalm was included in the psalter? What does it mean to you to have a God who invites us into this kind of prayer?

4: PRAYER

Close your time together in prayer using one of the ideas below

- Use words/images/themes from the passage to guide your prayer.
- Raise up your “wonderings” from the notice/wonder section to God in prayer.
- Take prayer requests and pray over each other as a group or in small groups.
- Use this written prayer:

There is a strange comfort, O God, in knowing that we can pour out our anger before you, even when it is ugly and vindictive. Better that we bring it to you than hold it inside or act it out in ways that hurt others. Forgive us when our anger is about our ego or our control. Help us in our anger not to sin, but to lay the injustice or the hurt at the foot of the cross, knowing that Jesus sometimes got angry too. Call us back to trust in you. Amen.