Psalm 137

St Francis

24/1/16 10am

Many years ago I went on an evangelistic mission to Weymouth on the south coast in Dorset. We did presentations every day using something called sketch-board. Basically someone did an interactive talk, painting up various images and words and you found a crowd would stop, wondering what you are doing. On one occasion a group of local youths came along and started heckling my friend Jeff. One of them had a water pistol and thought it would be hilarious to start squirting at Jeff and his sketch-board. Jeff was getting wet and the paint was running on the board. The crowd were losing it and so was Jeff. He started to see red - he threw his paintbrush down went over to the boy with the water pistol, snatched it off him, threw it on the ground and stamped on it! The crowd cheered and the boy sloped off!

Today’s talk is called Praying your Anger. Anger is a natural human emotion which we all experience. Do you have a short fuse or a long fuse? What makes you go? What things trigger you? How do we deal with it? Sometimes we have every right to be angry. The writer of the Psalm does.

We are dealing with the time when the Jews have been taken into exile in 587BC to Babylon. Jerusalem was besieged for 2 ½ years by King Nebuchadnezzar II during which the most horrible sufferings occurred. The starvation was terrible and many died including many children. Lamentations 4:4

The parched tongues of their little ones
    stick to the roofs of their mouths in thirst.
The children cry for bread,
    but no one has any to give them.

How this still rings true in this day! The Syrian town of Madaya was besieged since October last year, until this week.

On the 28th August 587BC, Jerusalem finally fell, and the invading troops burnt, destroyed temple and walls, raped the women, hung the princes by their thumbs, and there is some evidence that they took new born and dashed them against rocks.

Do you think of the Boney M version of this psalm when you hear the words? By the rivers of Babylon. Very jolly and catchy. But in reality it was nothing like that.

This psalm is about anger, it is about sadness, it is about rage against those who have wronged us.

After the massacre, Nebuchadnezzar selected the elite of Jewish society that remained – scribes, scholars, musicians, sages, prophets and carted them off to Babylon.

That’s where they sat down and remembered Zion (i.e. Jerusalem). With happy thoughts, perhaps? No. With bitter pain, sadness and anger.

How do we deal with those who have wronged us? Do we want to take revenge? Do we just feel bitter?

To make matters worse, their captors knowing that the Jews were fine musicians and singers, demanded that they sing the songs of Zion. “Come, entertain us with your beautiful music, your soothing melodies, your inspiring poetry”.

How could they? How could they use their precious heritage to amuse their tormentors?

Instead they cursed themselves and cursed their enemies.

They said let us be cursed if we ever sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land!

Just as their own children’s tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths, so let their own tongues stick.

Let their right hand wither, if they ever plucked a single note!

And they cursed their enemies – this is the bit we find really difficult.

**8**O daughter Babylon, you devastator![[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=psalm+137&version=NRSVA" \l "fen-NRSVA-16231b" \o "See footnote b)]
    Happy shall they be who pay you back
    what you have done to us!
**9**Happy shall they be who take your little ones
    and dash them against the rock!

Ouch!

How is any of this in the Bible? How can we pray or even speak this Psalm? It doesn’t sound very Christian. Is it God’s word to us to emulate this episode?

When we read the Bible we always have to work out the story, and where the author fits into it and where we also fit into it, and we’ve explored some of that already. But I have three further points to make.

Firstly, as we have learnt, anger, and especially anger in this context is a very human emotion. It is real, it happens. When one of my friends had his child taken into care, some years ago, when she was 9, it was eventually proved to be a big mistake. A health professional had got it wrong, but the experience had traumatised the child and he felt very angry. Very angry – even to the point that if he met the said professional in street he wanted to do her some serious harm. He said it, but he never did it. As far as we know the curse in this Psalm was never carried out, but emotion was expressed, and it was expressed to God. God can take it, he is big enough and I think it is ok to express emotion to God – even anger. I am glad that this Psalm is in the Bible because it says it is ok to be a real human being and express your feelings.

Secondly, God is the judge, not us. He will put right, He will punish, He will ensure justice is done. Spoiler alert. I went to see the film The Revenant in the cinema. It’s a true story about a man on a hunting expedition in the 1820s in Northern Canada who gets mauled by a grizzly bear and then left for dead by his friends. Anger and thoughts of revenge make him survive terrible ordeals. But in the final scene, about to dispatch his enemy, he remembers that revenge is for God, not for people, and so leaves his victim to his fate.

We may feel we want to wreak revenge, get our own back, give someone their come-uppance, but it’s not our job, and even the psalmist recognises that – others will carry out the deed, not him.

Thirdly, as Christians, we know that Jesus absorbs all this anger, all these curses on the cross

As we spoke about earlier, curses come in two forms: against ourselves and against others.

Some will take matters into their own hands and create a horrific cycle of violence which leads to misery all round. Other people, when they see no way of justice, will curse themselves – in self destructive behaviours - self harming, substance abuse, drinking and reckless living. They destroy themselves and their families.

“Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree” Gal 3:13

Did you know that Jesus took every one of those curses, those angry outbursts, those thoughts of revenge, and absorbed them into his body? Every wound and every cut inflicted was a curse neutralised, was anger spent. Therefore we can be free because Jesus has taken it.

So how do we pray our anger?

We have to recognise that we will feel anger and so it is ok to express it to God. He doesn’t mind. The Bible is full of it.

It does mean we don’ t take it any further. Vengeance is mine, says God, I will repay. We leave it to him.

And it does mean that Jesus is the ultimate solution. As we reflect on his suffering and struggle, we led to let go of our own and find a new future in forgiveness instead.

Amen.