

# IN HONOUR OF KING YAHWEH: The Book of Psalms

Week 5 — Exile and beyond



## Introduction

Half the Psalms bear the title “Of David.” Many others were written after David’s time. Tonight we’ll look at a couple of these later ones.

After the death of David and his son Solomon, Israel split into two kingdoms. Only Judah (southern kingdom) kept David’s descendants as king. The other tribes still called themselves Israel but appointed their own king. This northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by Assyria in 722 BC.

Psalm 80 is a cry to God to restore the northern kingdom. The most powerful tribes of the north were Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph. Of all the tribes, they received Jacob’s special blessing (Gen 48), but now they were gone. Psalm 80 cries to God, the Shepherd of Israel, to restore them, not to let these tribes die out:

Psa 80:3, 7, 19 Restore us, LORD God Almighty;  
make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.

135 years later, the unthinkable happened. Babylon invaded the one tribe that remained—Judah. Jerusalem was flattened. The temple was destroyed. The Davidic kingship ended. The leaders were exiled. The whole Promised Land was lost, subsumed in the Babylonian Empire. It seemed like God’s project had failed, like this was the end (Ezekiel 7:1-7). The godless had destroyed the godly. It was all over. That’s how it felt for those exiled to Babylon. Psalm 137 is a lament that describes their pain—the pain of losing everything.

## Psalm 137

This Psalm contains some of the most difficult and shocking language anywhere in Scripture. What do you do with a Psalm that concludes like this?

Psalm 137:9 Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
and dashes them against the rocks.

### *Meaning for Israel/Judah*

In the ancient world, Babylon was the epitome of magnificence. With its fabled hanging gardens, it was a wonder of the ancient world. The hanging gardens gave them food inside the city—even if an enemy besieged it. And the city straddled the Euphrates River, so they would never run out of water either. Its protective walls were so thick they could drive chariots around on top of them! The city was the symbol of civilization and power in the whole Mediterranean region.

But the exiles from Jerusalem appreciate none of this. For them, the Euphrates and associated grand canals of the great city are symbols of their imprisonment. By the waters of Babylon, they sit and weep (**137:1**). They want to be in Jerusalem, not Babylon.

Zion is a poetic name for Jerusalem. Zion had a different kind of glory to Babylon. Jerusalem was nowhere near as ostentatious. It didn’t

even have a river! But it had a temple—the place where God lived among his people. It had a palace—the place where God’s reign was expressed through a descendant of David. It had the promises of God—a little kingdom that would make a difference to the whole world when God’s promises were fulfilled.

Or, it used to have these things! Jerusalem was now a ruin. No temple. No kingship. No future. Its walls were rubble. Many of their friends and relatives had died defending it. Others were captured, dispersed among the nations. The hopes of Zion lay like a corpse in the dust.

The people of Judah had many songs celebrating Zion. Take Psalm 46 for example. They were so sure that God was in the midst of Zion—in his temple—and so no invader could defeat God and overrun his city:

46<sup>5</sup> God is within her [Zion], she will not fall;  
God will help her at break of day.

<sup>6</sup> Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall;  
he lifts his voice, the earth melts.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD Almighty is with us;  
the God of Jacob is our fortress.

That’s how the Levitical choir (“sons of Korah”) taught the residents of Jerusalem to think about their city. The city was stronger than the impregnable Babylon because God was there—in his temple—and no one could overpower God. The presence of God was their protection.

That’s exactly how the leaders responded when Jeremiah announced that Jerusalem would fall if they didn’t change their ways. It can’t happen, they argued, because God is here:

Jer 7<sup>3</sup> This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. <sup>4</sup> Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” ...

<sup>8</sup> But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. <sup>9</sup> “Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, <sup>10</sup> and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, “We are safe”—safe to do all these detestable things? <sup>11</sup> Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD. ...

<sup>14</sup> Therefore, what I did to Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your ancestors. <sup>15</sup> I will thrust you from my presence, just as I did all your fellow Israelites, the people of Ephraim.’

Just as Jeremiah said, God’s people were thrown out of their city, out of their land. Just like the northern tribes 135 years earlier.

**137:2-4.** The rejected people of God sat by the canals of Babylon, trying to make sense of this disaster. Their captors taunted them, rubbing salt in their wound by asking them to sing the songs of how wonderful Zion was and how God would always protect it. *The songs of Zion* (v.3) are *the songs of YHWH* (v.4) — parallel expressions in these two verses. How can they sing the songs of YHWH the protector of Zion while Zion lies in ruins? Their faith made no sense any more. They are completely disillusioned and disorientated.

**137:5-6.** They are silenced, but they refuse to give up their faith and their hope. All they have is a memory, but nothing else is worth living for. If they lose the memory of Jerusalem, there is no point retaining the skills they hold on to in the hope of rebuilding it (v.5). If they stop telling the story of YHWH, his Torah, his city, his presence among his people, there is no point being able to tell anything (v.6).

**137:7.** They cry to YHWH to overturn this tragedy, this injustice, this end to everything. They ask God to take vengeance against their neighbours from Edom who were so pleased to see Judah overrun, hoping to take the land for themselves. (The Edomites were descendants of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob. Perhaps they imagined they would finally get the blessing that Esau had forfeited to Jacob.)

**137:8-9.** These devastated Jews hope that, one day, God will give Babylon what she deserves for the way she has raped and violated the people of God. Their only hope is that Babylon will be destroyed, so the exiles can return and rebuild. In their minds, no punishment God could mete out would be unfair. Babylon deserved the worst that anyone could imagine!

Can you at least understand why they could say something as shocking as 137:9? That's where the Psalm ends—with the unresolved horror of God's decimated people and the failed promises of God, and a burning desire for Babylon to get what she deserves?

So what should the Christian make of this? Do you often pray for God to take your enemies' children and smash out their brains?

### ***Meaning in light of Jesus***

Jesus began his ministry 600 years after the Babylonian exile. Babylon had fallen to Persia, and the Cyrus had ordered the people to return to their land, to rebuild their cities and temples. Some of the exiles had returned, led by people like Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zerubbabel.

So, was the exile over? Sort of. They built a replacement temple, but they never regained their freedom, remaining subject to the reigning empire—Rome in Jesus' day. They were no longer God's representative kingdom among the nations. In fact, the majority of Jewish people did not live in Palestine in Jesus' day: they were still scattered across the Mediterranean.

The exile to Babylon had become a central feature of the story of God's people. Matthew begins his Gospel by locating Jesus within Israel's story. Jesus is the Messiah (Christ), the son of David (whose son was to reign), the son of Abraham (the family of God's people). But the exile to Babylon is the major roadblock to the fulfilment of those promises. That's how Matthew arranges his genealogy:

Mt 1<sup>1</sup> The record of the genesis of King Jesus, son of David, son of Abraham...

<sup>17</sup> Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to **the exile** to Babylon, and fourteen from **the exile** to the Messiah.

The exile was not merely a memory: it was the problem from which God's nation never recovered. It remained unresolved. They were still weeping and fasting for the restoration of what they had lost—God ruling over them.

But Matthew wants us to know that Jesus is the king they had waited so long for. The Jewish people may not have recognised him as king. Ironically, magi from the east (the direction of Persia/Babylon) did:

Mt 2:1-2 Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born **king of the Jews**?"

John the Baptist announced that the kingdom that had been absent for 600 years was about to be restored (Mt 3:2). Jesus did too (Mt 4:17). Jesus would bring the people back from exile, to be the kingdom of God once again.

So, how would Jesus conquer their enemies? Would he drive them out, as Joshua had done? Would he slaughter them as Samson did? Would he lead Israel out to battle as King David did, killing tens of thousands of their enemies (1 Sam 29:5)?

Actually, Jesus sounded much more like Jeremiah than King David. Jeremiah warned the people not to fight against Babylon, for God was going to give Jerusalem into the hands of Babylon and destroy the temple. Jesus told the Jews not to resist their enemies, not to fight against Rome (Mt 5:39-44). Jeremiah announced the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in his day; Jesus announced the destruction of Jerusalem (Lk 21:20) and the temple (Mt 24:1-2) in his day, even using the very words of Jeremiah (Mt 24:13, compare Jer 7:11).

So, Jesus planned to overcome the horrendous injustice of the exile in a completely unexpected way. Instead of killing their enemies, Jesus was killed by their enemies—given the death sentence on a Roman cross. He refused to fight—loving instead of killing their enemies. Instead of praying for God to smash their little ones against the rocks, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them ..." (Luke 23:34).

Jesus did not take the lives of his enemies; instead he gave his life to turn God's enemies into God's friends. That is a radical way to change the world!

***Meaning for us***

Psalm 137 is a lament that the world is so utterly broken, that God's justice is not done, that the bullies and rapists win. If you have ever been crushed by evil, bullied out of your inheritance, or raped and left for dead, the Psalm may be a useful way of coming to terms with the devastation and injustice of the world.

God wants your honesty. If you want vengeance, the best thing you can do is voice it to God—even if what you have to say is as shocking as Psa 137:9.

It's not wrong to ask God for vengeance against evil doers. It is God's role to sort out injustice in his realm. It is wrong to take vengeance into your own hands. God says:

Deut 32:35 It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them.

Consequently, the imprecatory prayer of Psalm 137:9 is not evil, for it is asking God for justice. The New Testament also insists that this is the right way:

Rom 12:19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

But as you look at Jesus, you see that Jesus did not overcome evil by doing evil things: he overcame evil by responding with good! That is so radical! And ultimately, he calls us to follow him—even if it means we get crucified too. (That's what he meant by "take up your cross.") It may take you some time to get through the desire for vengeance and forgive your enemies, but Jesus calls us to treat them the way he treated us. If we don't do that, we have no credible message of forgiveness and reconciliation for the world. Consequently:

Rom 12:20–21 If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. ...  
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Psalm 137 encourages us to be honest with our emotions. You won't feel like singing praise psalms about God's wonderful rule in Zion when you are crushed by evil and there seems to be no way forward, no future. Be honest with God. Be real. It's the only way through.

Then look at Jesus. Consider the hostility he endured from evil people, and how he responded. You are not standing at the point of death in the way he was. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus (Heb 12:2-4). Trust him. He will take you through what feels like exile, and restore God's just reign—not just for you but for the whole world.

## Psalm 108

### *Genre and structure*

Psalm 108 has an interesting history. The first 5 verses are from Psalm 57, and the rest from Psalm 60:

#### **Psalm 108**

<sup>1</sup> My heart, O God, is steadfast;  
I will sing and make music with all my soul.  
<sup>2</sup> Awake, harp and lyre!  
I will awaken the dawn.  
  
<sup>3</sup> I will praise you, LORD, among the nations;  
I will sing of you among the peoples.  
<sup>4</sup> For great is your love, higher than the heavens;  
your faithfulness reaches to the skies.  
<sup>5</sup> Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;  
let your glory be over all the earth.  
  
<sup>6</sup> Save us and help us with your right hand,  
that those you love may be delivered.  
<sup>7</sup> God has spoken from his sanctuary:  
“In triumph I will parcel out Shechem  
and measure off the Valley of Sukkoth.  
<sup>8</sup> Gilead is mine, Manasseh is mine;  
Ephraim is my helmet,  
Judah is my sceptre.  
<sup>9</sup> Moab is my washbasin,  
on Edom I toss my sandal;  
over Philistia I shout in triumph.”  
<sup>10</sup> Who will bring me to the fortified city?  
Who will lead me to Edom?  
<sup>11</sup> Is it not you, God, you who have rejected us  
and no longer go out with our armies?  
<sup>12</sup> Give us aid against the enemy,  
for human help is worthless.  
<sup>13</sup> With God we will gain the victory,  
and he will trample down our enemies.

#### **Psalm 57:7–11**

<sup>7</sup> My heart, O God, is steadfast,  
my heart is steadfast;  
I will sing and make music.  
<sup>8</sup> Awake, my soul!  
Awake, harp and lyre!  
I will awaken the dawn.  
<sup>9</sup> I will praise you, Lord, among the nations;  
I will sing of you among the peoples.  
<sup>10</sup> For great is your love, reaching to the heavens;  
your faithfulness reaches to the skies.  
<sup>11</sup> Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;  
let your glory be over all the earth.

#### **Psalm 60:5–12**

<sup>5</sup> Save us and help us with your right hand,  
that those you love may be delivered.  
<sup>6</sup> God has spoken from his sanctuary:  
“In triumph I will parcel out Shechem  
and measure off the Valley of Sukkoth.  
<sup>7</sup> Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine;  
Ephraim is my helmet,  
Judah is my sceptre.  
<sup>8</sup> Moab is my washbasin,  
on Edom I toss my sandal;  
over Philistia I shout in triumph.”  
<sup>9</sup> Who will bring me to the fortified city?  
Who will lead me to Edom?  
<sup>10</sup> Is it not you, God, you who have now rejected us  
and no longer go out with our armies?  
<sup>11</sup> Give us aid against the enemy,  
for human help is worthless.  
<sup>12</sup> With God we will gain the victory,  
and he will trample down our enemies.

So what are we to make of a Psalm that pulls together two halves of other Psalms to form something new?

In our world, copyright laws prevent people changing or reusing someone else’s song, and printing presses churn out identical copies. It wasn’t like that in the ancient world. Psalms can be compilations—songs from different sources and times, modified in ways that made them relevant for God’s people in subsequent times.

### *Meaning for Israel*

Psalm 57 had its own meaning in its own time. It belonged to the days of the kingdom when the king led God’s people out against their enemies. It asked for God’s help, expressing confidence in God’s faithfulness. The king promised to proclaim God’s praise when the victory was won.

Psalm 60 also comes from the time of the kingdom, but they used this one when they were beaten in battle. It begins by crying, “O God have you rejected us?” It laments the devastation of defeat. It acknowledges that God could use the nations to chastise his people because of their disobedience. It concludes by asking for God to restore them after their defeat.

Psalm 108 pulls together these two psalms from the days of the monarchy—a victory psalm, and a defeat psalm. It combines them to make something new for a later time. I suggest that this was done after the exile—when the kingship no longer existed, because Israel was part of a foreign empire. By juxtaposing a psalm of praise (Psa 57) and a psalm of defeat (Psa 60), they try to rediscover how God’s unchanging word from the past (the days of the kingdom) applied to them in their current struggle (after the exile).

Every generation must listen to Scripture and understand what it means for them. The goal doesn’t change, but how we are to live it and move towards that goal depends on what’s happening in our time.

So, how were God’s people to live under foreign powers? Were they to submit to their rulers and cooperate with them the way Daniel does with Nebuchadnezzar? Or were they to fight against their enemies and regain their freedom the way King David had done in days of old?

Psa 108 says they should:

vv 1-5 Look to God: he rules over the current mess.

vv 6-9 Cry to God deliverance, relying on the declarations he has made, and his authority over the nations.

10-13 Expect divine help to ultimately gain victory over enemies.

Of course, the question of how they were to do this in practice still remained. Some, like Judas Maccabeus around 160 BC, thought they should do this with a sword, while others thought they should wait for God to act. The conundrum was still unresolved when Jesus was born.

### ***Meaning in light of Jesus***

Jesus embodied all that the Scriptures taught, so how did Jesus embody Psalm 108?

- v.1-2 Jesus’ heart was steadfastly fixed on God.  
We don’t read of Jesus playing music, but he certainly woke with the dawn to discuss his role with Father (Mark 1:35).
- v.3 Jesus lived his whole life as praise to the Lord, and he recognised Father’s authority over the nations/Gentiles, e.g. Matt 4:15; 8:11; 12:18-21, 39-42; 15:22; 24:14; 25:32; 28:19.
- v.4-5 Jesus embodied the *hesed* (unfailing love) and *emunah* (faithfulness) of heaven’s ruler on earth, re-establishing the heavenly ruler’s glory over all the earth (John 17).

- v.6 Jesus was the mighty hand of God, living among us to save us and help us, so we are delivered as the expression of his love.
- v.7-8 Jesus is more than God speaking from his holy place: he was God coming to us from his sanctuary, to live among us in this unholy place and to set things right. All places are his (v.8), including the northern kingdom (Ephraim) and the southern (Judah)
- v.9 In the new covenant, Jesus rules not only over Israel but also over their enemies: Moab (east), Edom (south east) and Philistia (south).
- v.10-13 He has conquered those who were previously his enemies, not with a sword but with God's faithful committed love! He was rejected, but raised from the dead as our ruler. Who would have guessed that God would solve human oppression like this? Instead of trampling down their enemies, Jesus included them *in* the people of God!!!

Jesus is the unexpected resolution to Israel's history:

The Jewish people of the first century were expecting their God to come back in person to rescue them, revealing his glorious presence, defeating their enemies, and re-establishing them as his people once and for all.

They got Jesus.

They were hoping for a new exodus—that is, a repeat performance of what had happened fifteen hundred years earlier, when the Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt and their God (they believed) came to rescue them. He had overcome the powerful Egyptian rulers, liberated his people, and led them in person through the Sinai Desert to bring them to the promised land. Many prophets had said that one day God would do something like this again. Many people were hoping it would be soon.

They got Jesus.

They were hoping for a new age of justice and peace. Ancient scriptures had spoken of a time when the wolf would lie down with the lamb, the mountains would drip sweet wine, and the earth would be full of the knowledge and the glory of the one true God like waters filling the sea.

They got Jesus.

Is it any wonder they were puzzled?<sup>1</sup>

Jesus is the Saviour of the world (John 4:42).

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright. *Simply Good News*. (HarperOne, 2015), 40-41

## *Meaning for us*

Paul was in prison when he wrote his letter to the church at Ephesus. But Paul believed that Jesus now rules the nations! Consequently, Paul was not a prisoner of Rome, but of Jesus (Eph 3:1). He realises that even the Gentile nations belong under the authority of Christ—Gentiles like the Ephesians. Most of the Jews did not realise God had planned to include the nations: it was always God's intent, but for the Jews this wasn't obvious: it was a mystery:

Eph 3<sup>6</sup> This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

This is the big gospel: it incorporates more people from more nations than any of the Old Testament people imagined:

Eph 3<sup>17</sup> ... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being rooted and grounded in love,<sup>18</sup> may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth,<sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.<sup>20</sup> Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us,<sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Jesus solved the injustice that Israel experienced at the hands of the nations by facing that injustice himself, dying at their hands, and rising again to be appointed as the divine ruler over all nations. He didn't obliterate their enemies: he included their enemies. So now, Aussies and New Zealanders and Papua New Guineans and Timorese and Indonesians and people of all nations are incorporated and healed and saved and delivered by Jesus, and formed into his kingdom, the embodied presence of God. Hallelujah!

The defeats and victories of God's people are all rolled up in Jesus. He experienced our defeat, and—in resurrection—brought us God's victory over evil and death and every power that opposed his name. Jesus rules. We are his people. He brought us into Father's family.

## **Conclusion**

Tonight we looked at two Psalms that are not considered Messianic. They made no reference to the Messiah, and the New Testament does not quote these Psalms. They just stated how terrible things were after it all fell apart at the time of the exile, trying to make sense of the tragedy in their own time.

Nevertheless, Jesus is the resolution of all the unresolved aspects of Israel's history. He is the faithfulness of God in person. That's how the New Testament writers understood all the Scriptures.

What we have done is exactly what Psalm 108 did. Psa 108 picked up the pieces of Psalms 57 and 60, reinterpreting them for their own time. We have picked up the pieces of Psalms 137 and 108, and looked at them through the lens of Jesus. Jesus is the embodiment of all the Scriptures, of all the hopes of God's people. He is the living Word.

## Memory verse

**Psalm 108:5 (NIV)**

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;  
let your glory be over all the earth.

## Take home exercise

In preparation for next week, take one of the Psalms that means something to you. Avoid the ones we've covered in this series (Psalms 1, 2, 8, 22, 45, 89, 137, 108). If it's a long Psalm, you can just chose a stanza.

Take your chosen Psalm, and ask the questions we've suggested, i.e.:

1. What type of Psalm is it? Lament, praise/hymn, thanksgiving, royal, or wisdom?
2. What would the Psalm have meant for the Jewish people in Old Testament times?
3. How should we read the Psalm in the light of Jesus?
4. What does the Psalm mean for us (personally and corporately)?

How have these questions helped you to meditate on your Psalm and appreciate its meaning? Come next week ready to share with the group an insight about the Psalm you chose.