

DETOUR THROUGH THE PSALMS: HOW DO YOU DEAL WITH ANGER?

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.
Psalm 137:1

FAITH STORY:

Psalm 137:1-9

FAITH FOCUS:

The people of Judah had been conquered by the Babylonians in the year 587 BCE. It was a terrible time, when the temple and almost all of Jerusalem was completely destroyed. 99% of the people were exiled to the land of Babylon. Many died along the way. To make matters worse, their captors mocked them, asking them to sing joyful songs about Jerusalem while they laughed at them. Psalm 137 is a song about all these troubles. In this song, the exiles express great anger—even to the point of killing their enemies' babies. But in all their anger, they always leave the revenge to God.

SESSION GOAL:

To help students express real anger to God and to leave the punishment up to God.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:**By the end of this session, the students will:**

- Make bumper stickers that illustrate how Christians usually express anger.
- Discuss whether or not the anger expressed in the Psalms is legitimate.
- Compare Psalm 137 with other psalms that ask God to take vengeance for the people.
- Write or draw their anger and then participate in a service where they can choose to give that anger to God.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 Strips of paper the size of bumper stickers and markers
- 3 Several pieces of paper and markers for each student
- 4 A supervised campfire for the Respond activity

SESSION OUTLINE**FOCUS: (10 minutes)**

Pass out long strips of paper, the size of bumper stickers, and have the students write funny bumper stickers about how Christians usually deal with their anger. One example would be "If you're angry and you know it, clap your hands." After everyone is done, ask for volunteers

to show their bumper stickers. Discuss how Christians typically express their anger and how they should express their anger.

CONNECT: (5 minutes)

Ask, *“Did the people of the Bible ever express their anger?”* See how many Bible stories the youth can think up that involved anger. Transition into the Bible study with this statement: *You might be surprised at how freely the followers of God did express their anger, especially in the Psalms. There are more lament (psalms that deal with sadness, anger or disappointment with God) than any other kind of psalm. Let’s look at Psalm 137 for an example.*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (15–20 minutes)

Ask for a volunteer to read aloud Psalm 137. Do a mini-lecture and make the following points:

- Through the prophets, God warned the people of Judah that if they didn’t repent of their injustice and their false idols, they would be conquered and exiled.
- They didn’t repent and Babylon conquered them and exiled 99% of them.
- The temple was completely destroyed as was most of the city—totally ruined.
- They literally did go to the rivers of Babylon, the Tigris and Euphrates, and their captors probably did mock them, asking them to sing their Zion songs—Zion means Jerusalem.
- The people of Judah connected land, and particularly Jerusalem, with the guarantee of God blessing them. They thought they would never be conquered because they had a king in the line of David (unconditional covenant with David) the temple, and priests in the line of Levi—and most of all their land. So to lose the land (and king, temple and priests) meant to lose their faith.
- So the exiles were grief stricken and mad.

Now ask, *“Was their anger legit? What did they want to have happen to their enemies? Is this a proper response?”*

After an initial discussion over these questions, break the group up into 3 smaller groups and assign these psalms:

- Psalm 58:6-11
- Psalm 94:1-3
- Psalm 109 (entire psalm).

Ask, *“Does it seem to be okay to express anger? Which parts of your assigned scripture made you uneasy? Do any of your psalms go too far?”* Then say, *“Look back at your passages. Who is supposed to carry out the vengeance? Who is asked to do the dirty work in your passages?”* Point out to the youth that in every call for vengeance in the Psalms, the people are not to do the revenge, but call on God to take revenge. Ask the students, *“Does knowing this, that God is the only one to take out vengeance in the Psalms, make you feel better about the terrible things expressed in these psalms? What would Jesus say about these outbursts? Did he take it a step further when he told his followers to love their enemies?”* In the midst of this discussion, be sure

that the students know that God is okay with their honest anger, even if in the heat of the moment, it is severe. You cannot find healing for anger unless you are honest about your feelings. But the psalms clearly draw a line at taking actions that belong only to God.

APPLY: (10–12 minutes)

Hand out pieces of paper. Ask the youth to express on paper whatever anger they are dealing with right now. Some will write and some will draw. Perhaps some people will wad up their paper and throw it. But encourage everyone to find a safe, quiet place and to express their anger to God as honestly as they can. Remind them that God loves them enough that he can take it.

RESPOND: (5–7 minutes)

Take the group outside to a campfire. Gather around the fire and explain that in the midst of a time of prayer, the students may throw their papers into the fire, as a symbol of releasing their anger to God. Lead in this guided prayer:

God of the exiles,

We feel exiled ourselves right now.

There are people mocking us

And terrible things have happened to us.

We feel such anger.

Listen to us now as we spill our pain to you.

(Silence)

Lord, we don't want to be eaten up by the anger inside of us. We want to be free. Help us to be free, because we can't do this without you. Help us to give our anger to you.

(You throw in your paper as a signal that others may do so)

Lord, help us to feel your love. Lord, help us to be truly free.

Amen.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 137 is a poem that points to a historical event more than most psalms in the Bible do, specifically the historical context of the Babylonian exile. The people of God had been divided into two kingdoms since 922 BCE. The people of the South, or Judah, watched as the people of the North, Israel, fell to Assyria in 722 BCE. The people of Judah became self-righteous as they analyzed the reasons why Israel fell. They assumed they were more righteous than Israel. Jeremiah and other prophets warned them that they would fall just like Israel, for they too practiced Baal worship and dealt unjustly with the poor and marginalized people. But most people took no heed of Jeremiah's warnings. They had the Temple, priests in the line of Levi and a king in the line of David. They were secure forever.

But the prophets were right. Babylon started to overtake them, deporting thousands of

people and taking valuables from the temple. But still the people refused to repent. So, in 587 BCE, Babylon captured Jerusalem and completely destroyed the city and the temple. 99% of the people were deported to Babylon. It was a terrible journey, where many died along the way. So when Psalm 137 opens with the words “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept,” it speaks of the real rivers of the Tigris and Euphrates and the real experience of the Babylonian soldiers mocking them to sing a Zion (Jerusalem) song.

The poem comes to us in three parts. Verses 1-3 are about grief, verses 4-6 are about remembering and verses 7-9 deal with anger. Two theological truths pop out at the reader. First, there is a great irony in that Psalm 137 is a song about a group of people who can't sing songs. It's not that they have forgotten Jerusalem or their relationship with God; it's this very memory that is so painful. They know that if they ever forget these same songs, if they ever really can't sing them, they are doomed. There is such great importance in remembering.

The second great truth is that grief and anger are inseparable. Healthy grieving includes anger. The crying and sorrow of verses 1-4 are matched by the intense anger of verses 7-9, an anger so intense that the poem calls for the killing of innocent babies.

Many Christians are bothered by this ending. It seems anti-Christian to want the Babylonian babies to be dashed against the rocks. Some commentators propose that “Daughter Babylon” is a symbol for a whole people (the Chaldeans or Babylonians) and so the “little ones” is also symbolic. There isn't a real cry for babies to be killed. Others say that this psalm is only calling for a repayment of what the Babylonians did to the people of Judea when they took over Jerusalem. Probably many babies were killed during the takeover. But both comments miss the point. The psalmist, speaking for all the exiles, is terribly angry, and apparently, this anger is okay to express in a song of worship. It is an honest way of dealing with the reality of one's soul.

Many psalms are similar, expressing great amounts of anger that many Christians today are hesitant to own. Psalm 58:6-11 calls for God to break the teeth of the enemy. The righteous will rejoice when they can bathe their feet in the enemies' blood. In Psalm 94:1-3, God is proclaimed a God of vengeance. The first 20 verses of Psalm 109 call for God to curse the psalmist's enemies in numerous and creative ways. At first glance, this doesn't seem like the God of the New Testament. And even upon further reflection, Jesus does seem to take believers to a new level of love for the enemy, which is not fully developed here in the Psalms. But consistent throughout these angry, vengeful Psalms is the cry for God take revenge. God is the only one who should decide when and how to punish enemies. Nowhere do the people see themselves in this position. They leave that duty to God. This, at least in part, redeems the vengeful speech in these psalms. The psalmist can express anger that needs to be honestly expressed—for the sake of the writer and his audience. But the actual act of revenge is left to the One who knows and judges every heart.