

Rev. Eugene Peterson, muses in his book on the Psalms, "We have been brought up, most of us, interpreting what is wrong in the world on a grid of moralism. Moralism trains us in making cool, detached judgments. Deep down, the moralist suspects that there are no, or at least not very many, real victims. People get what is coming to them. In the long run people reap what they sow. The rape victim, the unemployed, the emotionally ill, the prisoner, the refugee – if we were privy to all the details we would see that, in fact, "they asked for it."

The Psalms will have none of this. The Psalms assume a moral structure to life, but their main work is not to train us in judgmental moralism but to grapple with evil. Their praying insights have identified an enemy and they respond in outrage. They hate what they see. On behalf of all the dispossessed, the mocked, the dehumanized of the earth they pour into the ears of God their sightings of the enemy, not "siphoning off hate, but channeling it in effective ways, in covenantal shapes.

Loving your neighbor doesn't mean 'just be nice to each other.' Christian charity does not mean we need to be ignorant of evil. There are inappropriate forms of rage and there are many ways we can channel hate that is destructive. But when faced with evil, rationalizations and moralism just doesn't cut it. Loving your enemies includes acknowledging that they exist and that their victims do too."

But what do we pray as we really are not how we think we should? Today's prayer, Psalm 137 is a shocker...a prayer that brings out not the best of us, but the worst of the human condition: vile, venomous, vicious hate.

Psalm 137 is described as a plaintive song of the Babylonian exile – when Israel was deported to a foreign occupying homeland and faced with genocide and cultural destruction. It's a prayer-song of one who has returned from Babylon but in whose soul there lingers the bitter memory of the years in a foreign land and of the cruel events that led to that enforced stay. The 12 poetic lines of the Hebrew song divide symmetrically into three stanzas of four lines each: the remembered sorrow and torment (vv. 1-3), an oath of total commitment to Jerusalem (vv. 4-6), a call for retribution on Edom and Babylon (vv. 7-9). [from the intro to Psalm 137 in the NIV Study Bible Notes]

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## Psalm 137

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

- <sup>1</sup> By the rivers of Babylon—  
there **we sat down** and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.
- <sup>2</sup> On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.
- <sup>3</sup> For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- <sup>4</sup> *How could we sing* the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?
- <sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!
- <sup>6</sup> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.
- <sup>7</sup> Remember, O Lord, against *the Edomites*  
the day of Jerusalem's fall,  
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!"
- <sup>8</sup> O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!
- <sup>9</sup> Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!

### QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- **What word, phrase or image grabs your attention?**
- **How does this psalm prayer trouble you?**
- **How do you identify with this prayer?**
- **How do you deal with hate, anger, desire for vengeance, or justice? How do you deal with such hungers in and through your faith?**
- **How does this psalm touch your (our) life today?**

**we sat down:** sitting is the traditional posture of mourning. Remembering the exile from their homeland in Zion brings the poet to his knees in grief. The same posture is associated with brokenness and grief in Job 2: 8, 13 “<sup>8</sup> Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and **sat among the ashes....**<sup>13</sup> [Job’s three friends] **sat with him on the ground** seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.”

*How could we sing:* The world is ending. The poet is mocked by her captors who ask her to sing to entertain them, to sign a diddy about the all-powerful Israelite God who seems to be silent. The prophet talks about the Exile as the end of the world, God’s judgement of evil, resulting in a deadly silence, a total absence of music and mirth. (Isaiah 24):

<sup>1</sup> Now the Lord is about to lay waste the earth and make it desolate,  
and he will twist its surface and scatter its inhabitants.  
<sup>4</sup> The earth dries up and withers,  
the world languishes and withers;  
the heavens languish together with the earth.  
<sup>5</sup> The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants;  
for they have transgressed laws,  
violated the statutes,  
broken the everlasting covenant.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore a curse devours the earth,  
and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt;  
therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled,  
and few people are left.  
<sup>7</sup> The wine dries up,  
the vine languishes,  
all the merry-hearted sigh.  
<sup>8</sup> The mirth of the timbrels is stilled,  
the noise of the jubilant has ceased,  
the mirth of the lyre is stilled.  
<sup>9</sup> No longer do they drink wine with singing;  
strong drink is bitter to those who drink it.

*the Edomites:* the Edomites were the descendants of Esau, who lived south of Judea (and Israel). Their ancestor rejected God’s blessing, giving it to his younger brother Jacob (from whom comes the nation of Israel). The Edomites also were instrumental in the downfall of Jerusalem when they helped the ruler of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar II plunder Jerusalem and slaughter the Judaeans in 589-587 BCE. This hatred and desire for vengeance against Edom is mentioned in the prophets and in particular in Obadiah 1.

<sup>1</sup> The vision of Obadiah.  
Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom:  
<sup>2</sup> I will surely make you least among the nations;  
you shall be utterly despised.  
<sup>4</sup> Though you soar aloft like the eagle,  
though your nest is set among the stars,  
from there I will bring you down, says the Lord.  
<sup>10</sup> For the slaughter and violence done to your brother Jacob,  
shame shall cover you,  
and you shall be cut off forever.  
<sup>11</sup> On the day that you stood aside,  
on the day that strangers carried off his wealth,  
and foreigners entered his gates  
and cast lots for Jerusalem,  
you too were like one of them.  
<sup>12</sup> But you should not have gloated over your brother  
on the day of his misfortune;  
you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah  
on the day of their ruin;  
you should not have boasted  
on the day of distress.

