

# Psalm 137

## - Is there Gospel to be found in Psalm 137? -

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### Introduction

- ❖ Is there Gospel to be found in Psalm 137? The answer “yes” is hard to believe when the reader arrives at verse 7-9: “Happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us— he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.”
  - Wilcock comments: “Psalm 137 is memorable for its evocative opening phrase, *By the rivers of Babylon*. Equally memorable, for different reasons, are its closing verses, about the babies of Babylon and their gruesome fate. That passage is hard to stomach, and not surprisingly the Anglican ASB liturgy decreed in 1980 that it ‘may be omitted’. We shall come to it in its place, remembering that that place is at the climax of one of the most moving psalms in the Psalter.”<sup>1</sup>
  - Limburg reminds: “If the Bible’s narrative materials relate what God has done and the prophetic literature reports what God has said, the Psalms present the response of the people to the acts and words of God.”<sup>2</sup>
- ❖ It is very easy to condemn the final words of this Psalm (verse 8 and 9) as being harsh and cruel. But before doing so, it is necessary to sit next to the Jews by the rivers of Babylon and to feel the same pain as they did, when they watched their little children being dashed against the rocks by their enemies. Therefore, It is better to sit down ourselves and weep when we remember the innocent victims of this world and pray for justice, mercy and righteousness in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilcock, M. (2001, Vol. 2, p. 252).

<sup>2</sup> Limburg, J. (1992, p. 522). *Psalms, Book of*. In D. N. Freedman (ed.).



Figure 1 Arthur Hacker: *By the Rivers of Babylon*.

- It is equally important to have a look at our own history, the atrocities, the

holocaust, children being separated from their mothers and fathers, abused, and killed.

- ❖ Acknowledging this, is it possible to preach the Gospel in a sermon based on Psalm 137?
  - Yes, because this Psalm teaches the church a profound longing for standing in the presence of God. Furthermore, this Psalm is not silent about the atrocities of this world, and the church should not be silent.
  - Yes, because the Psalm teaches the individual to sing out the heartfelt pain because of traumatic experiences. It often occurs, that victims don't speak out what they have seen, felt, and only after years start to talk about their experiences.
    - This Psalm is a call for justice, but we must be aware of the fact, what justice means when your child, your father, your mother, brother, sister has been killed in a horrible way.
  - Yes, because it is a call to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ:
    - "They called out in a loud voice, "How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?" (Rev 6:10).
- ❖ Psalm 137:1-3 (and Psalm 19:14) became in 1978 a popular song, sung by Boney M.<sup>3</sup>
  - Psalm 137 inspired many artists (songs, poems, paintings).<sup>4</sup>
- ❖ The context, form and structure, theological, technical and hermeneutical notes given in this sermon outline overlap with other sermon outlines taken from the Book of Psalms. This makes it possible to use this sermon outline as a "stand-alone". You can also fit this outline into a series of sermons.

## Context

- ❖ The historical context of Psalm 137 is partly known. There are two historical references:
  - (Verse 1) "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion."
  - (verse 7) "Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. 'Tear it down,' they cried, 'tear it down to its foundations!'"
- ❖ The literary context. Book of Psalms belongs to the Wisdom literature. Psalm 137 is part of the fifth book of Psalms (Psalm 107-150).

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a9jVIApUQsw>

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 137. (2019, September 18). Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm\\_137](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_137)

## Form and structure

- ❖ Psalm 137 consists of three parts.

Lamentation	
<p>(verse 1-4) Note the use of “we”.</p>	<p>1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.</p> <p>2 There on the poplars we hung our harps,</p> <p>3 for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”</p> <p>4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?</p>
Vow	
<p>(verse 5-6) Note the use of “I”.</p>	<p>5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.</p> <p>6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.</p>
Retaliation	
<p>(verse 7)</p>	<p>7 Remember, O Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. “Tear it down,” they cried, “tear it down to its foundations!”</p>
<p>(verse 8-9) Note the use of “us” (“we”)</p>	<p>8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us</p> <p>9 he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.</p>

- It is possible that Psalm 137 was sung responsively:
  - WE (verse 1-4) – lament
    - I (verse 5-6) – vow (response), as an answer to the communal lament.

- WE (verse 7-9) – call

❖ Analysis of the structure of verse 1-4:

A.	<i>Location: in a foreign land – how can we sing?</i>	1	By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.
B.	<i>Contrast &gt; Expressing the pain of grieve</i>	2	There on the poplars we hung our harps,
C.	<i>Mockery</i>	3	for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
B'.	<i>Contrast &gt; Feeling the pain of grieve</i>		they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
A'.	<i>Location: in a foreign land – how can we sing?</i>	4	How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

- The Songs of Zion and Songs of the Lord are the same songs.
- This part of the Psalm focusses on the mockery of the captors and tormentors (C).

❖ Analysis of the structure of verse 5-6:

A.	<i>protasis (condition)</i>	5	If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
B.	<i>apodosis (consequence)</i>		may my right hand forget its skill.
B'.	<i>apodosis (consequence)</i>	6	May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
A'.	<i>protasis (condition)</i>		<b>if I do not</b> remember you,
A''.	<i>protasis (condition) and climax</i>		<b>if I do not</b> consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

- The repetition “**if I do not**” intensifies the song.
- The climax should be noted: forget > not remember > not consider.

❖ Analyses of the structure of verse 7:

A.	<i>remember</i>	7	Remember, O Lord,
B.	<i>what</i>		what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell.
C.	<i>this</i>		“Tear it down,” they cried, “tear it down to its foundations!”

- By using “**what**” (= “**לִּמָּוֶלֶת**”): —19. expression of an exact relationship: a) concerning.<sup>5</sup>) the song evokes the remembrance of what the Edomites have done.
  - The Jews still remember the cry of the Edomites for the destruction of Jerusalem.
- The repetition “**tear it down**” intensifies this cry of the Edomites and within the context of Psalm 137, the pain felt by the Jews sitting by the rivers of Babylon.

❖ Analyses of the structure of verse 8 and 9:

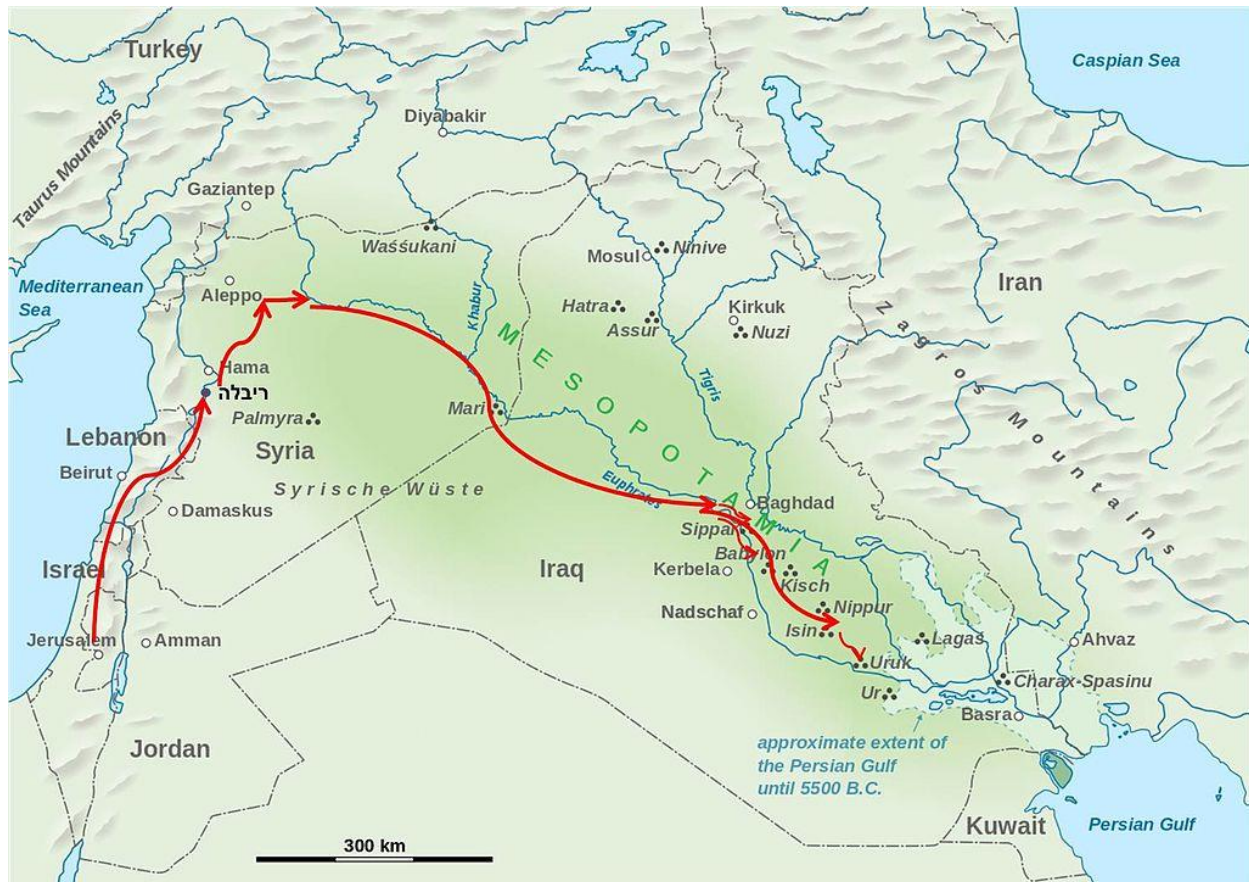
A.	<i>Call for attention</i>	8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction,
B.	<i>Revenge</i>	happy is he who repays you
C.	<i>Law of retaliation</i>	for what you have done to us
B’.	<i>Revenge</i>	9 ( <i>happy is</i> ) he who seizes your infants
C’.	<i>Law of retaliation</i>	and dashes them against the rocks.

- C gives the reason for C’. “**What you have done to us**” = you (Babylonians) have seized our infants and dashed them against the rocks.

### Technical, hermeneutical and historical notes

- ❖ After the conquest and the destruction of Jerusalem, the temple and the walls, part of inhabitants were deported by the Babylonians.

<sup>5</sup> Koehler, L., Baumgartner, W., Richardson, M. E. J., & Stamm, J. J. (1994–2000, p. 509).



Modern map of the Middle East. The journey of the Judean exiles to Babylon in the first decades of the 6th century BC.<sup>6</sup>

- ❖ The besiege, conquest and destruction of Jerusalem is described in the historical books.
  - (587 B.C.) 2 Kings 25:8-12 (Jer 52:12-14): “On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, Nebuzaradan commander of the imperial guard, an official of the king of Babylon, came to Jerusalem. He set fire to the temple of the Lord, the royal palace and all the houses of Jerusalem. Every important building he burned down. The whole Babylonian army, under the commander of the imperial guard, broke down the walls around Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan the commander of the guard carried into exile the people who remained in the city, along with the rest of the populace and those who had gone over to the king of Babylon. But the commander left behind some of the poorest people of the land to work the vineyards and fields.”
  - Jeremiah 52:27-30: “So Judah went into captivity, away from her land. This is the number of the people Nebuchadnezzar carried into exile: in the seventh year, 3,023 Jews; in Nebuchadnezzar’s eighteenth year, 832 people from Jerusalem; in his

<sup>6</sup> (2019, August 26). Psalm 137. Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm\\_137#/media/File:בבל\\_גּוּל יְהוּדָה.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_137#/media/File:בבל_גּוּל יְהוּדָה.jpg)

twenty-third year, 745 Jews taken into exile by Nebuzaradan the commander of the imperial guard. There were 4,600 people in all.”

### Parallellismus membrorum

- ❖ Parallellismus membrorum is a special feature of Biblical literature, especially of the Old Testament Wisdom Literature, i.e. The Book of Job, Psalms and Proverbs. It “is also present, although less prominent, in biblical prose. It can be defined as the repetition of the same or related semantic content and/or grammatical structure in consecutive lines or verses.”<sup>7</sup>
- ❖ There are three kinds of parallelism:
  - Synonymous parallelism.
    - Two (or three) lines express the same thought. Verse 3 is an example:
      1. for there our captors asked us for songs,
      2. our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
      - See also verse 5, 6.
  - Syntactical parallelism
    - The second line completes the first line, as is shown by verse 5:
      1. If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
      2. may my right hand forget its skill.
    - The second line gives the reason for the first line (verse 6, line 1 and 2):
      1. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
      2. if I do not remember you
    - A special case is a climactic form. Two lines express the same thought, the third line concludes with a climax (verse 6, see also verse 3):
      1. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
      2. if I do not remember you,
      3. if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.
  - Antithetical parallelism
    - This type is not found in Psalm 137.

## **Exposition**

### Verse 1-4 Lamentation

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<sup>7</sup> See for more information: Berlin, A. (1992). *Parallelism*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed.)(Vol. 5, p. 155).



- ❖ Lament:
  - See also Lamentations 1:1-11.
  - See technical, hermeneutical and historical notes.
- ❖ **“By the rivers of Babylon.”** This is probably the southern part of the Babylonian Empire. The Tigris and the Euphrates were the main rivers. The Babylonians had constructed irrigation canals to water the arable land.
- ❖ **“we sat.”** This refers probably to the moment that the exiles had reached this area and came to rest. The captors are still present to guard the captives. Later, the Jews will settle and regain some freedom. But for now, they had lost everything, their freedom, their country, their city and the temple of the LORD had been destroyed. They even had witnessed the cruel death of their children (see verse 9). The modern reader can easily understand that the Jews **“wept when we remembered Zion.”**
- ❖ **“Zion”** designated the dwelling place of God. In Lamentations and also in Psalm 137 “Zion” is used interchangeably with **“Jerusalem”** (verse 5-7; Lam 2:6-8).
  - **“Songs of Zion”** “were a known quantity of songs before the Exile.”<sup>8</sup>
- ❖ **“There on the poplars we hung our harps.”** They stopped singing joyful songs.
- ❖ **“our tormentors demanded songs of joy”**
  - Note the contrast **“we sat and wept”** and the demand for **“songs of joy.”**
  - Kraus comments: “they belong to the area of mocking questions asked by the enemies (‘Where is their God now?’ Ps. 79:10; 115:2). The contrast between the contents of the songs of Zion and the present situation of the exiles should become apparent—that is the meaning of the demand that is heard in verse 3.”<sup>9</sup>
  - Example of Assyrian mockery:
    - Isaiah 36:4-10: “The field commander said to them, ‘Tell Hezekiah,’ ‘This is what the great king, the king of Assyria, says: On what are you basing this confidence of yours? You say you have strategy and military strength—but you speak only empty words. On whom are you depending, that you rebel against me? Look now, you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces a man’s hand and wounds him if he leans on it! Such is Pharaoh king of Egypt to all who depend on him. **And if you say to me, “We are depending on the Lord our God”—isn’t he the one whose high places and altars Hezekiah removed, saying to Judah and Jerusalem, “You must worship before this altar”?** “ ‘Come now, make a bargain with my master,

<sup>8</sup> Levenson, J. D. (1992). *Zion Traditions*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed., Vol. 6, p. 1102).

<sup>9</sup> Kraus, H.-J. (1993, p. 503).

the king of Assyria: I will give you two thousand horses—if you can put riders on them! How then can you repulse one officer of the least of my master’s officials, even though you are depending on Egypt for chariots and horsemen? **Furthermore, have I come to attack and destroy this land without the Lord? The Lord himself told me to march against this country and destroy it.’ ”**

- Lamentations 1:7:  
“In the days of her affliction and wandering Jerusalem remembers all the treasures that were hers in days of old. **When her people fell into enemy hands, there was no one to help her. Her enemies looked at her and laughed at her destruction.**”
- Lamentations 2:15, 16:  
“All who pass your way clap their hands at you; they scoff and shake their heads at the Daughter of Jerusalem: ‘Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of the whole earth?’ All your enemies open their mouths wide against you; they scoff and gnash their teeth and say, ‘We have swallowed her up. This is the day we have waited for; we have lived to see it.’”

- **“How can we sing?”**

#### Verse 5-6 *The vow*

- ❖ The previous verses were sung by the “we-voice”. This part of the Psalm is sung by the “I-voice” as a response to the first verses.
  - There is a sharp contrast with the preceding verses, the refusal to sing songs because of grief and refuse to give in to the quest of the captors, and the wish to sing songs of remembrance and joy.
- ❖ **“If I forget you, O Jerusalem”**
  - If the Jews don’t sing their songs of Zion, the songs of the Lord, they are at risk to forget Jerusalem! Songs are important to remember, to teach, to express feelings of fear and joy, of anger and love.
  - **“Jerusalem”** stands for meeting the Lord (Psalm 24):
    - Who may ascend the hill of the LORD?  
Who may stand in his holy place?  
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
who does not lift up his soul to an idol  
or swear by what is false.  
He will receive blessing from the LORD  
and vindication from God his Savior.  
Such is the generation of those who seek him,

who seek your face, O God of Jacob. *Selah*

(See also Psalm 102:21, 22; 116;17-19; 122; 138, a.o.)

- ❖ **“may my right hand forget its skill” and “may my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth”**
  - **“right hand”** and **“tongue”** are poetical expressions for the ability to make music (“hand”) and to sing songs (“tongue”). I will never be able to make music or to sing a song.
- ❖ **“Jerusalem my highest joy”** = standing in the presence of the Lord is my highest joy.
  - Jerusalem remains the highest joy, notwithstanding the history of Jerusalem and the exile.
    - **“The LORD sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders** against him. He sent them to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the LORD proclaimed by his servants the prophets. Surely these things happened to Judah according to the LORD’s command, in order to remove them from his presence because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done, including the shedding of innocent blood. For he had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD was not willing to forgive” (2 Kings 24:2-4).
    - **Psalm 137 was composed and sung by a group of pious Jews.**
  - The contrast with the following verse 8 should be noted:
    - Highest joy <> tear down, tear down. This is a painful contrast.

#### Verse 7 *The retaliation (imprecation)*

- ❖ **“Remember”**
  - Verhey notes: “In great hymns of faith Israel gave praise to God, and a fundamental reason for that praise was that God remembers “his covenant” (Ps 105:8 = 1 Chr 16:15; Ps 106:45; 111:5; also Luke 1:72). The covenant is presupposed when God is said to remember “his steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ps 98:3; cf. 136:23), “his promise” (Ps 105:42), or “his mercy” (Luke 1:54). The covenant is not just something from the past, and remembering it is not merely the neutral apprehension of an image from the past. In the covenant and in remembering the covenant, God establishes an identity and is faithful to it, determines a cause, and acts in accordance with it.  
The laments—and other prayers—plead for it”<sup>10</sup>
- ❖ **“Edomites”:**
  - Obadiah prophecies (verse 13-14):  
“You (*Edom*) should not march through the gates of my people  
in the day of their disaster,  
nor look down on them in their calamity  
in the day of their disaster,

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<sup>10</sup> Verhey, A. (1992 ). *Remember, Remembrance*. In D. N. Freedman (Ed., Vol. 5, p. 667).

nor seize their wealth  
in the day of their disaster.  
You should not wait at the crossroads  
to cut down their fugitives,  
nor hand over their survivors  
in the day of their trouble.”

- See also Ezekiel 25:12-14 and 35:5-9.

#### Verse 8-9

- ❖ **“Daughter of Babylon”** = people of Babylon.
- ❖ **“doomed to destruction”**
  - Babylon has been destroyed by the Persians.
  - The Persian King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and Judah (Ezra and Nehemiah).
- ❖ **“Happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us”**
  - Wilcock comments: “His disconcerting word *happy*—*happy is he who repays you*—anticipates Revelation 18:20, when the entire anti-God world system symbolized by the ancient city finally falls. ‘Rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you.’”<sup>11</sup>
  - **“What you have done to us”** summarizes the cruelties and atrocities of ancient warfare (and modern warfare!):
    - 2 Kings 8:12: “‘Why is my lord (the prophet Elisha) weeping?’ asked Hazeal. ‘Because I know the harm you will do to the Israelites,’ he answered. ‘You will set fire to their fortified places, kill their young men with the sword, dash their little children to the ground, and rip open their pregnant women.’” (See also 2 Kings 15:16; Ho 13:16.)
  - **“Repay,”** Isaiah prophesied concerning Babylon (Isa 13:1-23):
    - “Therefore I will make the heavens tremble; and the earth will shake from its place at the wrath of the LORD Almighty, in the day of his burning anger. Like a hunted gazelle, like sheep without a shepherd, each will return to his own people, each will flee to his native land. Whoever is captured will be thrust through; all who are caught will fall by the sword. Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be looted and their wives ravished” (verse 13-16).
  - **“Rocks,”** there are no rocks found at the location where the Jews sat down and wept (verse 1). Thus it is probably a reference to the moment that Jews who were taken captive left Jerusalem, and during their march, the Babylonian captors took the little children and dashed them to the rocks.

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<sup>11</sup> Wilcock, M. (2001, Vol. 2, p. 254).

## Application

### Remark

- ❖ *“When wicked people in power begin destroying the faith and persecuting believers maliciously, the righteous must strengthen their resolve to keep their hope alive and must submit their desires for vengeance to the LORD in prayer.”<sup>12</sup>*

### Praise

- ❖ Indeed praise!
  - Because this Psalm expresses the faithfulness of God towards his city, his people, while they are still in exile, in a foreign land.
    - The Psalm itself expresses the highest joy.
  - Because Christ has become the supreme righteous judge, who will pass his judgment on all atrocities, for which this world is responsible. He will do justice towards all who suffered, mockery because of his name:
    - “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Mt 5:10-12).
  - It is true, the Lord Jesus Christ taught the church: “But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:48) and it is equally true that church can be called to “rejoice over her, O heaven! Rejoice, saints and apostles and prophets! God has judged her for the way she treated you” (Rev 18:20).

### Lessons

- ❖ When Christians are being persecuted and have lost many things, this Psalm teaches:
  - To lament.
    - It is important to recognize the pain felt in the heart.
    - It is important to try to understand the pain of the heart, expressed in this Psalm.
  - To be strong and not to submit to the whims of persecutors.
  - To keep their vow of faithfulness. Jesus Christ is their highest joy.
  - To remember the history of the local, national, and the worldwide church.
    - **Knowledge of Church History is important!**
      - The moments of joy and of blessing.

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<sup>12</sup> Ross, A. P. (2016, Vol. 3, p. 796).

- The moments of distress, persecution, unfaithfulness.
- The moments of grieve, sorrow and repentance.
- To sing songs of joy but also of grieve and remembrance.
- To pray and ask God to do justice.
  - “They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’” (rev 6:10).
  - The apostle Paul wrote: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. **Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.** On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:17-21; Deut 32:35; Prov 25: 21, 22).
  - 3. *This is precisely what God has done.* Romans 2:6 says that God “will give to each person according to what he has done” (citing Ps. 62:12; Prov. 24:12). He has done it! Today the fortresses of ancient Edom are a desolate waste, and the site of ancient Babylon is a ruin. God cannot be mocked.<sup>13</sup>
- This Psalm reminds us of the atrocities of this world, especially genocide.

#### Additional Remarks

- ❖ “Edom,” Wilcock remarks: “Edom is an example of all who have to choose between the church and the world. ‘Once to every man and nation Comes the moment to decide, In the strife of truth with falsehood, For the good or evil side.’ James Russell Lowell’s lines go on to say what Edom was not prepared to do—to ‘side with truth’ and to ‘share her wretched crust’. As then, so now, sooner or later Edom has to take sides, for in the end there is only Jerusalem or Babylon. Or rather (let the Sons of Edom take note) there is only Jerusalem: risen from death to witness on the last day, as Revelation tells us, the smoke of her rival’s burning.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Boice, J. M. (2005, p. 1192).

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