

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 137

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalms 137 is an exilic lament psalm — one of the most emotionally raw texts in the entire Psalter. The psalm opens with the community of Israelite exiles sitting beside the rivers of Babylon, weeping as they remember Zion. Their captors demand songs of joy, songs of Zion — a cruel irony, since to sing such songs in a foreign land would be to perform worship stripped of its context and meaning. The exiles refuse: they hang their harps on the willows and cannot sing the LORD's song in a strange land. The psalm then moves to a solemn oath of remembrance — Jerusalem must never be forgotten, never deprioritized, never allowed to slip from first place in the psalmist's affections. Then the psalm pivots sharply into imprecation: first against Edom, who cheered the destruction of Jerusalem, and finally — most shockingly — against Babylon itself, invoking a curse upon those who would dash Babylonian infants against the rocks. The psalm ends not with resolution but with raw, unresolved rage.

This Text — Intent

God is accomplishing several things through this psalm simultaneously, and they must not be separated. First, He is giving His people permission — indeed, He is giving them *words* — to voice grief, rage, and disorientation without editing those emotions into something more acceptable. The inclusion of this psalm in canonical Scripture is itself a theological statement: this is what faithful people look like when everything has been destroyed. Second, He is anchoring the covenant community's identity to Jerusalem — not merely as geography but as the locus of His presence, worship, and promise. The exiles' refusal to sing is an act of theological integrity, not spiritual depression. Third, and most controversially, He is inviting His people to bring their rage against their enemies directly to Him rather than acting on it — the imprecations are prayers, not actions. They are cries for divine justice addressed to the only One who can justly execute it. God's intent through this psalm is to hold His people together in their grief, keep their identity tethered to His covenant, and redirect their most dangerous emotions into the only form that is both honest and safe: prayer.

Subject Sentence: Exiles beside Babylon's rivers cry out in grief, oath, and rage — and God receives it all.

Primary Claim: God does not require His people to sanitize their pain before bringing it to Him; He receives the full weight of grief, loss, and righteous fury as covenant prayer — and He holds His people’s identity together precisely in the moments when everything else has been destroyed.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Imprecatory Closing (vv. 8–9)

No passage in the Psalter generates more hermeneutical controversy than the final verses of Psalm 137, particularly verse 9: “*Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock.*” Three broad approaches compete here.

The first is the *expurgation approach*, common in liturgical traditions and some evangelical homiletics: these verses are acknowledged as present but set aside, either omitted from public reading or treated as sub-Christian sentiments that the New Testament corrects. This approach fails on multiple counts. It presupposes a canon-within-a-canon in which the expositor adjudicates which portions of Scripture are genuinely inspired, and it refuses to reckon with the psalm’s canonical status. The Holy Spirit did not accidentally include verse 9.

The second is the *historicist approach*: these words simply record what Babylon did to Israel (Psalm 137:8 echoes the language of Isaiah 13:16 and 2 Kings 8:12), and the prayer is for God to apply the *lex talionis* — the same measure of destruction — to the perpetrators. This reading has genuine exegetical merit. Babylon was famous for precisely this atrocity against conquered peoples, and the psalmist is asking God to repay in kind. The “blessing” invoked is not a personal expression of delight in infant death — it is a juridical cry that Babylon’s own measure be returned upon it.

The third, and Reformed, reading integrates both dimensions. These are genuine imprecatory prayers — honest, raw, and theologically intentional. They do not represent moral instruction (“we should want this”) but covenantal prayer (“we bring even this to You”). The key Reformed observation is that imprecatory psalms are **prayers addressed to God, not calls to human action**. The psalmist does not pick up a weapon — he picks up words and brings them to the LORD. This is the very thing James 1:20 warns against (“the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God”) — precisely because the anger of man, when redirected into prayer rather than action, is placed under God’s sovereign adjudication. Furthermore, the imprecations find their canonical resolution not in Christian retaliation but in eschatological judgment (Revelation 18-19), where Babylon falls and the people of God are vindicated. The New Testament does not cancel the imprecation — it relocates its fulfillment to the final judgment of God.

Acknowledgment of the Wesleyan/Arminian reading: Wesleyan interpreters who emphasize the progression of revelation rightly note that the New Testament calls

believers to love enemies (Matthew 5:44) and that the Spirit produces love, not rage. This instinct is not wrong — but the Reformed response is that the psalm does not contradict Matthew 5:44 because it does not command human retaliation. It redirects rage into prayer. Jesus Himself quotes imprecatory language in the Olivet Discourse and the Revelation of John is saturated with imprecatory content. The New Testament does not dissolve the imprecations — it fulfills them eschatologically.

Acknowledgment of the Dispensational reading: Some dispensational interpreters treat this psalm as specifically applicable to a future national Israel returning from eschatological exile, limiting its direct homiletical use for the church. While the psalm's historical context is specific, its canonical placement in the Psalter and its citation in New Testament contexts (Paul quotes Psalm 137 indirectly in Philippians 3:20's exile-homeland theme) support its direct applicability to any covenant community in exile — including the church living between resurrection and consummation.

The Refusal to Sing (vv. 3–4)

Some interpreters read the exiles' refusal as a failure of faith — they should have sung, as Daniel prayed and Paul sang in prison (Acts 16). This reading misses the theological precision of the refusal. The exiles are not refusing to worship God — they are refusing to perform worship for pagan captors as entertainment. The “songs of Zion” demanded by the Babylonians were not invitations to genuine worship — they were demands for cultural capitulation, a performance of Israelite religion stripped of its covenantal context. The refusal is an act of theological integrity: *we will not make the holy into spectacle for the ungodly*. This reading is confirmed by the oath of remembrance that follows — the psalmist's refusal is grounded in the supremacy of Jerusalem in his affections, not in spiritual paralysis.

Key Canonical Support

- **Lamentations 1–2** — The same historical moment, the same grief, the same cry of “look and see” directed at the LORD in the wake of Jerusalem's destruction; confirms that corporate, public lamentation is not faithlessness but the appropriate covenant response to catastrophe.
- **Jeremiah 29:4–14** — God's own instructions to the exiles in Babylon: settle, build, pray — but also “I know the plans I have for you”; the promise embedded in exile; establishes that God is present and purposeful even in Babylon, making Psalm 137's cries intelligible as addressed to a God who is actually there.
- **Revelation 18:1–24; 19:1–5** — The fall of Babylon and the “Hallelujah” of the saints; the canonical resolution of the imprecations of Psalm 137; Babylon does fall, the people of God are vindicated, and the blood of the saints is avenged — not by human hand but by divine judgment.

- **Romans 12:19–21** — “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord” — the New Testament ground for why imprecatory prayer is the right form for righteous anger; bringing the imprecation to God is precisely what it means to refuse personal vengeance and trust divine justice.
- **Philippians 3:20 / Hebrews 11:13–16** — The New Testament’s own appropriation of the exile-and-homeland theme; the church as exiles who have not yet arrived at their true city; makes Psalm 137 immediately applicable to the eschatological condition of all believers.

Aim: To demonstrate that God’s Word gives His people permission and language to bring their full, unedited grief and rage to Him — and that doing so is not faithlessness but the deepest form of covenant fidelity.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Exiles by the rivers of Babylon, weeping, remembering Zion	“Rivers of Babylon” — likely the Euphrates and its canal systems; exile as physical and psychological dislocation
2	Harps hung on willows	The instrument of praise silenced; a symbolic act of mourning — not abandonment of worship but suspension of its expression
3	Captors demand “songs of Zion”	The cruelty of the demand — performance of sacred worship as entertainment for oppressors
4	“How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?”	Rhetorical question functioning as a theological refusal; the song belongs to Zion
5	Oath: if I forget Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill	The right hand — the hand of craft, service, and action; the oath is total: I bind my very capacity to function to

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		my remembrance of Jerusalem
6	If I do not remember Jerusalem above my chief joy	“Chief joy” — the highest ordering of affections; Jerusalem is not merely important, it is primary
7	Prayer against Edom — “remember, O LORD, the day of Jerusalem”	Edom’s role in cheering the destruction (cf. Obadiah); “lay it bare, lay it bare” — the cry that Edom’s rejoicing be remembered by God
8	Address to “daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed”	The judgment on Babylon is already fixed — “doomed”; the psalmist is not calling down judgment but acknowledging it and asking God to act on it
8b	Blessing on those who repay Babylon as she has served Israel	Lex talionis applied covenantally — not personal revenge but juridical equivalence
9	Blessing on those who dash Babylon’s infants against the rock	The most extreme application of the lex talionis; this is what Babylon did to Israel (cf. Isaiah 13:16); the psalmist asks that it be returned

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–4	The Silence of Grief: Exiles Who Cannot Sing
2	5–6	The Oath of Remembrance: Jerusalem Above All Joy
3	7	The Prayer Against Edom: Remember Their Cruelty, LORD
4	8–9	The Imprecation Against Babylon: Let Justice Come in Full

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Exiles beside Babylon's rivers cry out in grief, oath, and rage — and God receives it all.

Primary Claim: God does not require His people to sanitize their pain before bringing it to Him; He receives the full weight of grief, loss, and righteous fury as covenant prayer — and He holds His people's identity together precisely in the moments when everything else has been destroyed.

Applications (Five)

1. Your grief over what has been destroyed is not a spiritual problem to be fixed — it is a prayer to be offered. (*Affections/worship*)

When Jerusalem falls — when the marriage ends, when the diagnosis comes, when the church fractures, when the culture that once seemed hospitable turns hostile — the Spirit-given response is not cheerful stoicism. It is weeping beside the rivers of Babylon. The exiles did not sin by weeping; they would have sinned by pretending not to. The psalm gives you permission, and more than permission — it gives you *words* — to bring the full weight of your loss to God without editing. If you are sitting beside the ruins of something that mattered deeply, do not perform worship you do not feel. Bring the grief itself.

2. Theological integrity sometimes looks like silence, and silence is not the same as faithlessness. (*Mind/belief*)

The exiles refused to sing. Not because they had abandoned God, but because they would not make the holy into entertainment for those who held them captive. There are moments in the life of the believer — in contexts hostile to the faith, under pressure to perform Christianity as a cultural product — when the most faithful thing is to hang the harp on the willow and refuse. Discern the difference between the silence of grief-that-trusts and the silence of unbelief. The exiles' silence was an act of covenant fidelity: *we will not give away what is holy to those who would merely consume it.*

3. Keep Jerusalem first — let the thing that should be first actually be first. (*Affections/worship*)

The psalmist's oath is not primarily about geography. It is about the ordering of love. "If I do not set Jerusalem above my chief joy" — the LORD's presence, the covenant people, the worship of God — then let everything else I do be meaningless. Ask yourself honestly: what is your chief joy? What do you structure your life around? The exile exposed the Israelites' ordering of loves with brutal clarity. It will expose yours too. The losses of life have a way of revealing what you actually worship. Let this psalm be the occasion to audit your loves and return Jerusalem to its proper place.

4. Bring your rage to God rather than acting on it — imprecatory prayer is not un-Christian, it is the most Christian alternative to vengeance. (*Will/behavior*)

The psalmist does not pick up a weapon against Babylon. He picks up words and brings them to God. This is the precise move Romans 12:19 calls for: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” When someone has done to you what Babylon did to Israel — when real harm has been done, real cruelty inflicted, real innocence violated — you are not required to pretend you feel no rage. You are required to bring that rage to the only Judge who can handle it justly. Imprecatory prayer is not a failure of sanctification; it is the redirection of righteous anger into the hands of God. Write the prayer. Say it to Him. Then leave it there.

5. Your exile is temporary and your true city is already secured — live now in light of where you are going. (*Mind/belief*)

The New Testament explicitly picks up the exile-and-homeland theme and applies it to the church (Philippians 3:20; Hebrews 11:13–16; 1 Peter 1:1). You are not yet home. The world you live in is not the world that has been promised. The grief of Psalm 137 is the grief of people who know where home is and find themselves somewhere else. But — and this is everything — Revelation 18–19 shows the consummation: Babylon falls, the people of God are vindicated, and the imprecations of the Psalter find their resolution in divine judgment. You are sitting beside rivers of Babylon, but you are not staying. Act accordingly.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 137 teaches us that God is not a deity who demands emotional performance from His people. He does not require sanitized prayer, curated grief, or edited rage. The inclusion of this psalm in the canonical Psalter — unresolved, raw, ending in imprecation rather than doxology — is itself a revelation of God’s character: He is large enough, sovereign enough, and covenant-faithful enough to receive the full weight of human pain without being threatened by it. The psalm also reveals that God’s people retain their covenantal identity precisely in the moment of apparent divine absence. The exiles have no temple, no sacrifice, no priesthood functioning — and yet the psalm itself is an act of worship, a prayer addressed to the God of the covenant who, though He has handed His people to Babylon for their discipline, has not abandoned them. Theology done honestly must have room for Psalm 137.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: The Reformed tradition has always insisted on the *sola gratia* logic that God’s relationship with His people is not conditioned on their spiritual performance — and Psalm 137 is one of the starkest demonstrations of that logic in the

Psalter. God does not revoke His covenant when His people are weeping, raging, and refusing to sing. The psalm belongs to the Psalter as the prayer book of Christ's body, and the Reformed reading of the Psalter as the hymnbook of the covenant community means that Psalm 137 is not an embarrassing outlier to be managed but a full-throated member of the canon of prayer. Furthermore, the imprecatory closing finds its Reformed resolution in the doctrine of final judgment: God alone is the righteous Judge, vengeance belongs to Him, and the eschatological resolution of Babylon's fall in Revelation 18–19 demonstrates that the covenant God who received the psalmist's cry has been working toward its just resolution all along. The psalm is not pre-Christian sentiment to be superseded — it is covenantal prayer that the New Testament fulfills.

Main Takeaway

God is not waiting for you to get your emotions under control before He will receive your prayer. Psalm 137 ends in unresolved rage — and it is in the Bible. Bring the grief you have been editing. Bring the anger you have been managing. Bring the disorientation of sitting beside Babylon's rivers when you expected to be home by now. God receives all of it — as prayer, as covenant cry, as the voice of His people in exile — and He will do with it what only He can do.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Skipping or apologizing for verses 8–9.** This is the most common homiletical failure with this psalm. Preachers either omit the final verses, read them with visible discomfort, or spend so much time apologizing for them that the congregation never hears what they actually teach. These verses are in the Bible. They are in the Bible because God put them there. The preacher's job is not to make them comfortable but to make them intelligible — to show that imprecatory prayer is not sub-Christian violence but the theologically correct alternative to vengeance. Skipping them produces a truncated, dishonest exposition.
- **Treating the psalm as a model for political grievance rather than covenant lament.** Psalm 137 has been appropriated — particularly in liberation theology and social justice preaching — as a template for any group that feels oppressed to invoke divine violence against any oppressor. This universalizes the psalm's imprecations in a way that strips them of their covenantal specificity. The psalm is not a blank check for righteous rage against any perceived enemy. It is the covenant people of God bringing their specific historical grief to the covenant God who made specific promises about Jerusalem. The preacher must be careful not to let the psalm become a theological endorsement for whatever contemporary grievance is most pressing.

- **Romanticizing the grief without preaching the theological content.** It is possible to preach Psalm 137 as an emotionally resonant “permission slip” for pain — and to never actually preach the psalm’s theological argument about why Jerusalem matters, what the oath of remembrance means, or why the imprecations are prayers rather than incitement. The grief of Psalm 137 is not generic emotional pain — it is covenantally specific grief over the loss of the locus of God’s presence and worship. Preaching the emotion without the theology produces sentiment, not transformation.
- **Failing to provide the eschatological resolution.** A sermon on Psalm 137 that ends with the imprecations and does not point forward to Revelation 18–19 leaves the congregation sitting beside Babylon’s rivers with no horizon. The psalm is intentionally unresolved — but the canon is not. The New Testament explicitly takes up the fall of Babylon and the vindication of the saints. The preacher who does not show the congregation where the story goes has done only half the work.
- **Conflating the exiles’ refusal to sing with permission for chronic disengagement from worship.** The refusal in verses 3–4 is a specific, theologically grounded act in a specific historical context — not a general license for believers to opt out of corporate worship whenever they don’t feel like it. The exiles refused to perform worship for their oppressors; they did not cease to worship God. Preachers must carefully distinguish the theological integrity of the exiles’ refusal from a general warrant for spiritual withdrawal.
- **Missing the Christological dimension.** Jesus, who is the ultimate exile — the Son driven from His inheritance, crying out in desolation on the cross (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”) — is the one in whom every lament of the Psalter finds its fullest expression and its ultimate resolution. Preaching Psalm 137 without at least gesturing toward Christ’s own experience of exile, abandonment, and vindication leaves the gospel unconnected to one of Scripture’s most emotionally demanding texts. The congregation needs to know that their exile-grief has been carried by One who knows it from the inside.