

Happiness from Killing Babies? A Closer Look at Psalm 137

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | March 7, 2024



Have you ever read Psalm 137:8, 9 and wondered how it could have possibly been inspired by God?

O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks (Psalm 137:7-9 NIV84).

Do you struggle with this passage? Or do you take it just as it reads and think, “If the Bible says it, I believe it, and that’s all there is to it”?

These verses are the culmination of a short psalm that laments Israel’s captivity in Babylon; the psalm concludes with what appears to be a very human, worldly response to injustice—retaliation against the enemy. But is this what the Holy Spirit actually inspired the psalmist to write, or did something get confused in the translation?

If you check other translations, you will get very similar renderings, and that is because the language does allow for this particular interpretation. But is it the *most accurate* to the true intention of what God inspired to be written?

Understanding Bible Translation

How do you understand inspiration works?

My view is that God inspires the Bible writer with divine truths but leaves the human writer free to choose the words that express that truth. Thus, accurate Bible translation is primarily about bringing the meaning across, not the word-for-word translation, especially if the new language word means something different than the old language word intended. And to bring across the most accurate meaning, one needs to understand the truth about God's character, His design law, the nature of sin, and God's solution for the sin problem.

The most common distortion I have seen in Bible translation is when the translators believe that God's law functions like human law—imposed rules requiring God to use His power to inflict punishment for sin—rather than understanding God as Creator, who built reality, and His laws are the laws that reality functions upon, what I call design laws. When one translates through the belief that God's laws are like the laws creatures make up, then one, in innocence and with sincere motive, brings legal distortions into the text, ideas such as justice means retaliation or infliction of punishment.

But God inspired the Bible writers to write truths necessary for our salvation—truths about Him and the outworking of His plan to save us:

“For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us” (Romans 15:4 NIV84).

“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Corinthians 10:11 NIV84).

This means that the true-life, historical events recorded in Scripture also contain deeper spiritual truths to teach us the plan of salvation. You can read about some of these deeper lessons woven into the story of real historical people in these blogs:

- Joseph: A Foreshadow of Christ
- Samson: A Foreshadow of Christ
- Elisha and the Shunammite's Son—An Object Lesson About Christ

In fact, the 12 tribes of Israel acted out in theater the plan of salvation through the sanctuary system. You can learn about this in our three-part video series *The Sanctuary and Feast Days*

Seminar.

The purpose of the Bible is not simply to be a history book; it also uses that history to teach the truth about God and the plan of salvation. It is God's divine revelation to us of the reality of life beyond this earth and where we fit into His cosmic plan.

Comparing Translations

With these thoughts in mind, *The Remedy* paraphrase expands the meaning from merely the literal historical people who were held captive in the historical kingdom of Babylon to include the spiritual object lesson that both ancient Israel and Babylon represent: God's people enslaved by Satan's kingdom of fear and selfishness that operates upon imposed human law (Babylon), a legal justice system of inflicted penalties, that stands in contrast to God's kingdom, which Jesus said is within you (Luke 17:21)—the kingdom of spiritual health and wellness. Thus, *The Remedy* (REM) immediately draws the mind to consider the deeper lessons that the historical events in the Old Testament were recorded to teach us and, therefore, leads us to a reality-based understanding of this difficult passage.

So, let's compare these two versions of Psalm 137:

NIV84: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion" (v. 1).

REM: "By the rivers of Babylon, as captives in this selfish world, we wept when we remembered Zion—God's fortress of spiritual health and wellness" (v. 1).

Babylon is not only an ancient kingdom that enslaved the Israelites; it is also a symbol of the powers of Satan that enslave the people of God throughout history. In Revelation, God sends an end-time message that His people are to come out of Babylon (14:8; 18:2-4). I believe that Psalm 137 is meant to inspire us to look beyond just the historical to the actual larger conflict between God and Satan for every human soul.

Let's look at the next passage from Psalm 137:

NIV84: "There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?" (vv. 2-4).

REM: "There on the willows we hung our harps while our captors told us to sing: they demanded songs of happiness and joy; they said, 'Sing us a song of health about Zion!' How can our lives be songs revealing God's character of love while our hearts are held

captive to this selfish world?" (vv. 2-4).

The Remedy again expands the meaning beyond the historical people in the land of Babylon to the larger meaning, such that the song is not merely a tune that is sung from the mouth, but that the song is also the melody of our lives—that our lives are to be songs of truth and love that harmonize with God's kingdom of truth and love.

But how can our lives be songs that resonate truth and love if our hearts are held captive to this selfish world? This introduces the reality that, while we are in the world, we are not to be of the world (John 17:14-16). Even if we end up imprisoned by the powers of this world, like Jesus and so many of His faithful followers throughout history were, the evil powers of this world cannot imprison our hearts and minds without our consent. The only way we can have lives that are songs of truth and love to God is by having our hearts circumcised by the Holy Spirit (Romans 2:29), hearts set free from the captivity to the fear and selfishness of this world.

NIV84: "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. 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" (vv. 5, 6).

REM: "If I forget the truth about you, O Jerusalem—the center of God's healing plan—may I write no more music. May I sing no more songs, if they are not about you; if they do not teach God's healing plan centered in you, O Jerusalem, as my highest joy" (vv. 5, 6).

Here the psalmist makes it clear that he would rather be silent than use his talent to misrepresent God. This is also our prayer at Come and Reason Ministries! We pray that we will only say of God what is right, that our classes, presentations, publications, and programs will constantly improve and refine our ability to give ever more clear presentations about God, to advance and grow in truth, to eliminate any remnants of misunderstanding and falsehood that we have believed or taught. We would rather be silent than teach things about God that are not true!

And now, the final three verses of Psalm 137, ones that have been very difficult for people to understand and explain:

NIV84: "Remember, O LORD, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. 'Tear it down,' they cried, 'tear it down to its foundations!' O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (vv. 7-9).

Do you think that this is true just as it reads? Do you think that one can find true, genuine, godly happiness by killing the babies of one's enemies? So, on its face, this version isn't translated in a

way that, if taken as it reads, communicates truth.

Some scholars have understood this to be a psalm that, rather than communicating the truth of how reality works, the true way to find happiness, instead communicates the struggles of the psalmist—his anger, temptations, and carnal desires for vengeance—and models going to God in prayer where, in conversation with God, his worldly emotions are worked out. This principle of going to God with our anger and ungodly desires and talking with Him for heart change is absolutely a healthy action to take, and the psalmist does this in many other places (Psalm 13; 69), yet in those psalms, the psalmist always ends with verses about turning to God, that salvation is found in going to God.

But Psalm 137 ends with happiness being found in killing babies, not going to God. Therefore, I do not believe this psalm is about going to God with our distress and honest desire to kill babies and working out our earthly desires with God, because the psalm doesn't write about doing that in this passage. While I think it is right to go to God with one's frustrations, anger, and desire for vengeance and work it out with God, I do not think this psalm was written to model that, because I think it is a poetic description, inspired by the Holy Spirit, of what brings true happiness in the plan of salvation. This is how I render it in *The Remedy*:

“Remember, O Lord, what the Edomites did the day Jerusalem—your spiritual treatment center—fell? They shouted, ‘Tear it down, tear it down to the ground!’ O people of Babylon, who cling to selfishness, you are doomed to destruction! Happy are those who are finished with you, just as you deserve; who have weaned themselves from you. Happy are they who take your children to fall upon the Rock and be broken” (vv. 7-9).

Do you see the difference in this rendering from the traditional one? Can you see two different laws being applied—the imposed law in the NIV and design law in *The Remedy*? Which is most consistent with the plan of salvation? What is it that God is trying to do to sinners—destroy them or turn them from enemies into friends by bringing them to Jesus, the Rock of our Salvation, and have us fall upon Him to have our fear, selfishness, guilt, shame, and sinfulness broken up so we can be reborn in righteousness? And what brings genuine happiness? Isn't it when we turn our enemies into our friends by bringing them to Jesus and having them experience salvation and heart transformation?

If you would like to explore more of *The Remedy* paraphrase, you can click [this link](#) to read it online; download the free app in the Apple store for Apple devices or the Google store for your Android devices; or if you would like a print version, copies of *The Remedy New Testament* and *The Remedy of the Lord in Song: the Psalms* can be ordered on Amazon.