

## INTERVARSITY BIBLE STUDY GUIDE

### *Psalm 137:1-9 NIV, An Imprecatory Psalm (60 minutes)*

#### **WELCOME (7 minutes)**

Icebreaker: After we finish our series on the psalms today, how likely are you on a scale of 1-10 to pray and meditate on the psalms on your own?

We are studying the Bible together because we want to grow in our love for Jesus through Scripture and because we want to grow in our witness to Jesus through Scripture.

Let's pray and ask God to help us as we study today's passage together...

#### **GROUP NORMS (3 minutes)**

Let's remember our group norms as we study together today:

1. Use "I" statements (speak for yourself, not for everyone)
2. Avoid judgmental statements (no shame or blame)
3. Allow space for everyone to share if they choose
4. Practice active listening and give advice only if invited to do so
5. What we share here stays here (confidentiality)

#### **INTRODUCE the Scripture Text (3 minutes)**

If someone who has never studied the psalms asked you why they are part of the Bible, how would you respond? *Refer to the introduction of previous studies to help the group discuss this question, if needed.*

Today we will study an imprecatory psalm. This type of psalm is meant to invoke God's action to intervene and bring justice. Psalm 137 is set during the time of the Jewish people living in exile in Babylon.

You may want to reference the following passages for more understanding (that the original readers of this text would already have had).

- Jeremiah 51:56 – prophesy against Babylon
- Proverbs 24:17
- Leviticus 19:18

#### **SEE the Scripture Text (10 minutes)**

Let's read the passage and talk about what we see.

- Who are the characters? How are they connected?
- What is happening? When? Where?
- Which words are being repeated?
- Is the author comparing or contrasting anything?
- Would you like to point out anything else you notice?

Psalm 137:1-9 NIV –

- 1 By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.
- 2 There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,
- 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!"
- 4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord  
while in a foreign land?
- 5 If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
may my right hand forget its skill.
- 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.
- 7 Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did  
on the day Jerusalem fell.  
"Tear it down," they cried,  
"tear it down to its foundations!"
- 8 Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy is the one who repays you  
according to what you have done to us.
- 9 Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
and dashes them against the rocks.

### **DISCOVER the Scripture Text (25 minutes)**

Let's discuss a few questions that will help us discover and understand the text.

1. What might it have been like to be held captive by people who are taunting you by telling you to sing songs about the land they captured you from (verses 1-4)?
2. When the Babylonians captured ancient Israel, they committed terrible atrocities against God's people while Edom (the Hebrew people who were descendents of Esau, Jacob's brother) stood by and cheered them on (Obadiah 1:10-14). Verse 7 cries out for God to remember what the Edomites did. Why does the psalmist include this verse?
3. Verse 9 is one of the most disturbing verses in the entire Bible. It seems that what the psalmist is calling for against Babylon (that their infants would be seized and dashed against the rocks) is part of what Babylon had already done to the Jewish people (verse 8), but this graphic plea is still hard to read and hard to accept as part of Scripture. This imprecatory psalm is calling God to action, to make things right. How might verses 8-9 have helped the ancient Hebrew people enter into prayer and worship together?
4. If we could communicate the core message of this text in just one sentence, what would it be? What do we sense God is communicating through this passage?

### **RESPOND to the Scripture Text (10 minutes)**

This psalm remembers with vivid detail and emotion what it was like to be destroyed and oppressed by the empire of Babylon. The psalmist turns his raw and graphic rage-filled desires over to God in hopes that God would make it right. FIX IT, GOD! Cultural norms usually tell us to keep these types of uncensored thoughts and feelings to ourselves, but the psalmist models how to turn them to God. Being honest in prayer about violent desires can help prevent us from acting them out, and bringing ourselves to God in the midst of humiliation and trauma shows radical trust in God's strength and care for us. This type of honesty in prayer is good for our mental health.

Pour out your anguish and rage to God.

Let's discern together how we can respond to what God is saying. We will answer one option from below, whichever seems most relevant to our group's discussion of the text.

- A. Make a list of the oppressive practices and human rights violations that make you most angry. Pray together that God would intervene and bring justice!
- B. Sit with the psalmist and feel the despair and rage that fill the lines of this psalm. What thoughts and emotions does this bring up for you? How is God using this psalm to speak into your life?
- C. What raw thoughts or feelings have you been afraid to express honestly before the Lord? What has been holding you back? Confess and pray together.
- D. Use this psalm as a guide and write your own imprecatory psalm about an injustice you see in your community or in the world.

### **CLOSE (2 minutes)**

Let's pray and thank God for our time in Scripture together...

*Tips for leading the group discussion (and more tips are available at [howto.bible](https://howto.bible)):*

- *Participate but keep your comments short to make space for others.*
- *Silence is okay. Encourage further discussion by saying "What else?" instead of commenting on every response.*



this material and more can be found at [tiny.cc/biblestudyguides](https://tiny.cc/biblestudyguides)

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