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*Uncensored: The Rage of Psalm 137*  
July 22, 2018—Flip-Flop Sunday

There are certain things we just don't say out loud, even if they're true. For example, we would never say, "Yes, those pants DO make you look heavy." Or "No, your grandchild is NOT the cutest thing I've ever seen." Or, "As a matter of fact, yes, I do mind if you and your whiny toddler sit next to me on this airplane. I mind very, very, very, very much and I will resent you ferociously for the duration of this flight." And especially, we would never say, "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!"

So why did the people of Israel say it, and why is this song included in the Psalms?

Well, first of all this psalm comes out of the time of the Exile, and that was a time in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. when Jerusalem was invaded by Babylon, and burned to the ground, and some of the survivors were taken as captives back to the land of Babylon, which was located in modern-day Iraq. Since Jerusalem was God's holy city, this wasn't just a political or human disaster—this was a theological nightmare. And it sounds as though this particular psalm was written by a musician or musicians who remember being taunted by their captors. If we want to try to relate to them a little bit, we should try to imagine what it would feel like if somebody came and destroyed the White House, and the Capitol Building, and the Washington Monument and the Statue of Liberty, and every church and every school in every city in the country, and burned all the flags. Then they turn to us and say, "Sing the Battle Hymn of the Republic." Can you imagine how you would feel? Is anger an adequate word to describe that feeling?

I was thinking yesterday about the families of the 17 people who died in the Duck Boat accident in Branson on Thursday night. I read about one woman who was shaking and sobbing with anger, because her brother had been on that boat. She said, "I think this company should

have their bleepity-bleep sued off of them.” She wants retribution, and I doubt she’s alone. Yet as angry as she was, she didn’t say anything about wishing to dash anybody, little or big, against a rock. Neither did the survivor who lost 9 family members, including her own children. She did sound frustrated that the captain had not insisted on life jackets, but she didn’t say a word about dashing any little ones against any rocks.

Why, then, does this line get included in Psalm 137? Why is this Psalm even in here? What about “The Lord is My Shepherd,” and “Make a Joyful Noise to the Lord,” and all those GOOD psalms??? Shouldn’t we just focus on those?

Every summer, at some point I’ll notice a few wasps flying around the front door, and I’ll look up and there will be one or more wasp nests in the corner of the roof that hangs over the front door area. And I’ll say, “Rod, you need to go get rid of those wasp nests.” I don’t say, “Rod, go kill all the adult wasps,” because that would be ridiculous. I want Rod to destroy the nests, because that is where the wasps and all their little ones live. The little ones may not be a problem yet, in fact, they may only be eggs at this point, but if we leave them alone, they will turn in to lots of big wasps, and I would strongly prefer not to deal with any wasps at all. Destroy them all!

Whether it’s pests, or weeds in the garden, or a virus in our bodies, we want to attack things before they become a problem. We’d like to eradicate the invader so that we don’t have to worry about it coming back anymore. That is what is going on in this last verse of Psalm 137. These are people who have been invaded. They didn’t like it. They don’t want it to happen again. When they picture the little ones of their enemies, they aren’t picturing cute, cuddly, innocent babies. They are picturing future adult wasps. Just like an adorable baby

hippopotamus grows up into one of the most dangerous mammals on earth, so the children of enemies will grow into big, scary, adult enemies.

The people who would carry out the act of dashing little ones against a rock would be viewed as heroes bringing balance to a system where things are horribly out of balance, and protecting the community against the threat of future invasion. That's why the singer who wrote this uses the word "happy." "Honored" might be a better understanding of this word.

Are we satisfied with this explanation? I'm guessing probably not. Even if people viewed children differently in ancient times, which they did, we recoil from the intentional killing of children, even the children of people who want to hurt us.

So what do we do with this Psalm? Can we just skip it?

I would argue that not only can we NOT skip it, but we actually might NEED it. Psalm 137 is necessary.

It's necessary because it is a wonderful example of Ephesians 4:26, which we heard earlier. "Be angry, but do not sin." I've preached on this before, and I'll say it again: Be angry. When you feel angry, don't avoid it. Don't turn it off. In the entire history of feelings, this has never worked!

When we deny our anger, it turns into sarcasm, snark, judgment, depression, resentment, hate, and all kinds of toxic stuff. Personally, I believe that unacknowledged, unexpressed anger makes us ill. Only when we express it appropriately can we put it away from us, as the writer of Ephesians urges the early believers to do.

I read the last verses of Psalm 137 as the people's heartfelt cry to God to make things right. They are taking their feelings of rage and their desire for vengeance and offering all of that up to God. Note that they don't say, "Happy are WE who dash your little ones." It's

“Happy are THEY.” Because the people who sing this song and pray this prayer aren’t actually doing it. They’re not demanding that anybody do it. But they are ruthlessly honest with God in how they FEEL. That’s being angry without sinning. If they sing **only** this song, that’s not good. If they use it to justify ethnic cleansing . . . not good.

If there’s anything to take away from Psalm 137, it’s the reassurance that God can handle whatever difficult feelings we humans may have. For example, we may have moments when we wish we could kill the drunk driver who is responsible for the death of our mom. God can handle us saying that and feeling that.

I may struggle to forgive someone. I may struggle to be patient with someone. I may struggle with judging someone for the beliefs and choices that seem absolutely ridiculous to me. God can hear those things, too. But they need to be expressed to God, so we can ultimately let go of them and not let them weigh us down and control us anymore. And they need to be directed to God, not just thrown out there on Facebook or Twitter or Instagram.

As part of my preparation for preaching today, I wrote a list of the kinds of things that have made me angry lately. Stuff like watching people flick their cigarette butts out of the window of their truck onto the ground. People who have lied to me, disappointed me, or blown me off. Rude drivers. Somebody saying something disrespectful or mistreating somebody I care about. Inefficiency and bad service. You should have seen the smoke coming out of my nose when I had to wait something like 15 minutes at the pick up window at the McDonald’s on North Topeka Boulevard the other day.

I don’t know what it’s like to be outraged at the intentional destruction of my city, or be driven from my home against my will.

But many people in other parts of the world DO. For example, I wonder if the Rohingya could relate. They are the ethnic minority Muslims in the Buddhist country of Myanmar, and something like 50 percent or more of their villages have been burned to the ground, and their women raped, to terrorize them and drive them out. I wonder what they would hear in a psalm like this that we cannot hear, because our reality is so different. I wonder what refugees from Syria, or Central America might hear. I wonder what their prayers sound like these days, and what kind of songs they sing. I cannot begin to relate to what life is like for them, and I'm not sure whether to be sad, or grateful. Maybe some of both.

In just a moment, we will stand and sing the song, "What a Friend We Have In Jesus." I have mixed feelings about this song, because I tend to argue with the line, "We should never be discouraged"—really? NEVER? But I think our psalmist would wholeheartedly join in singing, "Take it to the Lord in prayer." Let us stand and sing . . .