Bringing our Anger to God

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[0:00] Dear God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

So as you can see on the first slide, today's sermon will be on bringing our anger to God. Have you ever been so angry that you didn't know what to do with the anger?

Maybe someone has betrayed you. Maybe someone has hurt your family. Or maybe destroyed something that is precious to you. The kind of anger that burns deep, that makes you want justice.

Or maybe even revenge. How should we, as Christians, respond when anger seems to overwhelm us? Now Psalm 137 is not a popular psalm.

It's raw. It's uncomfortable. It's filled with seething emotion that feels almost unchristian. C.S. Lewis, as we can see on the next slide, called psalms like this terrible.

[1:09] These psalms are sinful, he said. And you might also remember the next slide, the Boney M song, if you're old enough, 1987.

No, sorry, 1978. The Rivers of Babylon. It used the opening verses of this psalm, but skipped the parts about vengeance.

Probably because those words were just too shocking. So why does this psalm overflow with such intense anger? And more importantly, how can it guide us in handling our own anger today?

As we walk through Psalm 137, we'll uncover some crucial truths that will help us answer this question. So this is the way we'll be looking at the psalm today.

Next slide. So pain that demands expression in verses 1 to 4. Loyalty forged in suffering, verses 5 to 6. Justice cried out in anguish, verses 7 to 9.

[2:15] And finally, grace that transforms our anger. So let's begin with the pain that started it all. The scene opens in verse 1.

So just have a look at verse 1 with me. By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. Just picture the exiles in Babylon.

They're not tourists enjoying the river, but they're broken people whose entire world has been destroyed. If you can see on the next slide, that red squiggle.

Okay, so Israel is on the left-hand side near the Mediterranean Sea. The squiggle is approximately the path they would have taken into exile, into Babylon. So they've gone all the way into Babylon.

And you'll see the next slide. In terms of where we are in the Bible, you'll see right in the middle, there is a circle with a diagonal line through it.

[3:22] So this is the exile. So we're right about in the middle of the Bible, before the coming of Jesus. But it's the end of the Promised Land, end of the Davidic Kings. And so Israel, ancient Israel, is currently in exile, right in the middle.

So these deported Israelites are sitting in stunned grief, remembering not just the place, but they remember everything that they've lost. They've lost their land.

They've lost their kingdom. They've lost their homes and families. And their capital city is destroyed, along with the temple. All destroyed by their captors in Babylon.

But their captors won't even allow them dignity in their grief. Have a look at verses 2 to 3, which shows us their captors' cruel mockery.

Verse 2. There on the poplars we hung our harps. For there our captors asked for songs. Our tormentors demanded songs of joy. They said, sing us one of the songs of Zion.

[4:31] Now this isn't just insensitive. It's psychological torture. The enemies want entertainment from their pain.

It's like this. Imagine if Indonesia invades Sarawak. I was told a breakfast is going to be very unlikely. Just imagine for a second anyway.

So Indonesia comes. They destroy the state assembly building. They flatten the Kuching waterfront. And they burn down every church, including BEMKEC.

The Indonesian army takes community leaders, teachers, pastors, and people like you as captives to Jakarta.

Picture yourself sitting devastated as an exile. Homesick for the sound of Hokkien in the coffee shops. Longing for Sarawak laksa.

[5:27] And then your captors, grinning with cruel amusement, demand, Come on, sing us ibupeti wiku. Is that right?

With some enthusiasm. But you know what I'm talking about. Give us some of that Sarawak spirit, they say. We want to hear those worship songs you used to sing in church.

The exile's response in verse 4 captures this emotional impossibility. Verse 4. How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

A broken heart can't sing songs of joy. It's not just that they won't. They can't. The pain is too fresh.

It's too raw. It's too overwhelming. And here's one thing this teaches us. God doesn't expect us to pretend we're not hurting.

[6:34] This psalm does not condemn their tears. It doesn't condemn their inability to sing. Sometimes the most honest response to pain is silence.

Or perhaps tears. And an acknowledgement that we can't fake joy when our hearts are shattered. Perhaps in our churches we might feel the pressure to give praise.

Even when we are hurting inside. But Psalm 137 gives us permission to sit by the river and weep.

God sees our tears. He doesn't demand artificial worship. So to loyalty forged in suffering.

Next slide. From this place of pain, the psalmist makes a fierce vow in verses 5 to 6. Take a look at verses 5 to 6 with me.

[7:39] If I forget you, 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. Now this isn't just poetry. It's a desperate promise born from the fear that suffering might make the psalmist forget what matters the most.

The psalmist calls down a curse upon himself. If I ever stop caring about God's purposes, may my right hand become useless.

May I become... mute. Now you might wonder why the psalmist commits a city to a city instead of God directly.

Why does he commit himself to Jerusalem? But Jerusalem represented everything sacred. David's throne. The temple where God dwelled.

[8:50] The very place where heaven is thought to touch earth. So to forget Jerusalem was to forget God's covenant promises.

Now this vow might seem unnecessary, do you think? How could these devastated exiles ever forget their homeland? But here's the painful reality.

Time dulls even the sharpest grief. After years in exile, the practical demands of survival would kick in. Some would build new businesses.

Some would build new businesses. Make new friends. Adapt to Babylonian culture. And so the pain would slowly fade.

And with it, the passion for home. Now I know families from Malaysia whose children have moved to Australia or maybe Singapore for university or for work.

[9:53] And they've never come back. At first, they would call every week, homesick for kolomi and family gatherings. But after five years?

After ten years? They've put down their roots in their new country. They've made new homes. Their longing for Sarawak feels almost like a faint memory.

By contrast, the history of churches around the world, including in Malaysia, shows a very different kind of perseverance. Many faced persecution, and perhaps still do, societal pressures and societal challenges.

Yet, the church members held fast to their faith in God's word and his church. Even when it was difficult, even when others abandoned the faith, they made similar vows.

We will not forget. We will not compromise. We will remember what God has done.

[11:08] So the psalm's vow is both personal devotion mixed with some political defiance. I may be under foreign rule, but my heart remains with God and his purposes.

It's loyalty forged in the furnace of suffering, the kind that only can be created through pain. So here's what this tells us.

Sometimes our greatest spiritual growth comes not in good times, but when we're forced to decide what really matters.

When everything else is stripped away, what remains? The psalmist chose to let his suffering strengthen his commitment rather than weaken it.

So to the next slide, justice cried out in anguish. Now, as we reach verses 7 to 9, we notice that the psalm takes a dramatic turn.

[12:20] Having vowed personal loyalty, the psalmist turns his attention to divine justice, starting with verse 7. Take a look at verse 7 with me.

Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. Tear it down, they cried. Tear it down to its foundations.

Now, the Edomites were Israel's relatives, descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother. But when Jerusalem was under attack, they did not help.

Instead, they cheered from the sidelines, looted the ruins, and handed over survivors to the Babylonians. Family betraying family in their darkest hour.

Imagine this scenario. A gang breaks into your house to steal everything valuable. But instead of helping, your cousin stands outside, cheering them on, pointing out all the things that they've missed.

[13:31] Don't forget the jewelry. And there's cash in the kitchen. Then your cousin suggests, perhaps you can kidnap the children as well. The betrayal would have been crushing.

Almost worse than the original crime. That's what the Israelites felt towards the Edomites. Notice something important here, though.

The psalmist asked God to remember what the Edomites did. Now, in the Bible, when God remembers, it doesn't mean that he's recalling something that he's forgotten.

It means that he responds. Remembering has the idea that he's actually going to act. So when God remembered Noah in the ark, Genesis 8, verse 1, he acted to dry up the land.

When he remembered Hannah in 1 Samuel 1, he acted by opening her womb. So here, the psalmist isn't asking God to think back nostalgically.

[14:51] He's asking God to act in justice. But yet, also notice the restraint. The psalmist doesn't spell out what the punishment should be.

He cries for God to act, but he leaves the form of judgment in God's hands. This shows remarkable trust in God's wisdom, even in the midst of raw rage.

But then, take a look at verses 8 to 9. It almost seems as if the restraint is disappearing. Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us.

Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks. The raw violence of these words is frankly shocking.

The psalmist envisions Babylonian children having their heads smashed against stones and their blood spilt in the streets.

[16:07] It's a picture that is so brutal. We recoil in horror. But before we dismiss this as unchristian, we need to understand several crucial things.

First, this was the reality of ancient warfare. When armies invaded, civilians suffered most, and children were often the first victims.

The ancient Assyrians, for example, were infamous for their brutality. The kings boasted in inscriptions about skinning rebels alive, cutting off their noses and ears, and dashing their children to the ground.

The Babylonians carried out similar practices. When Jerusalem fell in 587 BC, they burned the temple.

They blinded King Zedekiah after killing his sons right before his eyes. And finally, they carried the people into exile.

[17:16] Infants really were slaughtered in these campaigns. Mothers and fathers really did watch their children die. Killing children in war is not unique to one nation or even to one era.

It was what often happened in war in Old Testament times. Indeed, as verse 8 reminds us, it is exactly what the Babylonians did to Israel.

One way a victor ensures there's no hope for the defeated is by killing the children. So there's no way that they could rise up against them in the future.

So when the psalmist envisions Babylonian infants dashed upon the rocks, he isn't inventing some grotesque imagery.

He's taking the very methods that Babylonians used on others and crying out for God to use the same measure on them.

[18:25] So that's the first point to remember. Second point is that God had already prophesied Babylon's destruction in Isaiah chapter 13.

Now, Isaiah 13 is a terrifying vision of God's judgment. It shows that Babylon, the very empire that crushed Jerusalem, would one day itself be crushed.

Take a look at verse 16 on this slide. Perhaps you can read it with me after three. Let's read together. One, two, three. So this is what we find in Isaiah already.

But why such extreme language that we find here? Why so extreme? Because it mirrors the horrors Babylon had inflicted on others.

Isaiah here is showing that God's justice is not random cruelty, but it is proportionate judgment.

[19:36] It's in proportion. What Babylon did to others, they themselves would suffer. It's a reminder that God sees every atrocity.

He sees every act of violence. And he promises that no empire or evildoer will escape his reckoning. So when the psalmist echoes that prophecy right here in Psalm 137, he isn't inventing something new.

He isn't indulging in personal fantasies. He's anchoring his cry in God's revealed word. His prayer is this, essentially.

Lord, do what you said you would do. Keep your promise of justice. Third point to remember.

This represents the cry of every victim of injustice throughout history. The psalmist's words give voice to something deep in the human heart.

[20:47] When evil destroys the innocent. When oppressors trample the weak. Something in us cries out for justice. From the Israelites mourning their slaughtered children.

To the Cambodians suffering under the Khmer Rouge. To perhaps Malaysians shaken by cases like the murder of Manisha Priko Akara. However, the instinct from us is the same.

Lord, bring justice. The Bible is shockingly honest about the way suffering people can pray.

Psalm 137 shows that even our rawest, most anguished cries can be poured out to God. The psalmist's words shock us because they are unflinchingly honest about the human's response, our human heart's response to injustice.

The psalmist doesn't spiritualize his grief or even soften his pain with religious language. He expresses the deep anguish felt by those who have been wronged.

[22:05] So here's what this tells us. God can handle our honest emotions. God can handle even our ugly, our difficult emotions.

God wants truth.

God can handle our anger. God can handle our anger. So to the next slide. Grace that transforms our anger. So how do we move from understanding this psalm to living as Christians in light of the psalm?

How do we handle the Psalm 137 emotions in our own lives? First, we must acknowledge that anger at injustice is not sinful.

It's righteous. When we see evil triumph, when the innocent suffer, when betrayers prosper, anger is the appropriate response.

[23:40] Jesus himself felt angry at injustice. The problem isn't anger itself. The problem isn't anger itself. It's what we do with the anger.

Some of us may know anger intimately. Perhaps a parent constantly compared you unfavorably to your siblings, leaving scars that are still aching decades later.

Perhaps a trusted friend shared your deepest secrets, destroying your reputation and relationships. Perhaps a business partner disappeared with all the money from your business, leaving you with a crushing debt.

Perhaps a spouse abandoned you and the children for someone else, shattering your family. In situations like these and many others, the desire for payback feels almost overwhelming.

We might fantasize about their downfall. We might imagine their suffering. We might hunger for the day when these people get what they deserve.

[24:56] Lewis Meads is a former professor of theology and ethics, and he identified four stages in the journey towards forgiveness, which is the next slide.

So he suggests we hurt, we hate, we heal, and then we can come together.

This progression is crucial. You see that we hurt, then we hate. Hate is often the natural, even necessary response to evil and injustice.

Psalm 137 gives voice to this stage. It doesn't skip all the way from hurt down to healing.

But the psalm also shows us how to handle our anger constructively. We bring our anger to God. The psalmist doesn't take revenge into his own hands.

[26:01] He doesn't try to hire an assassin or plot Babylon's downfall. Instead, he pours out his heart to God and entrusts justice into God's hands.

And this is the same as what Romans 12 calls us to do, which is the next slide. Let's read together after three. One, two, three.

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.

So bringing our anger to God serves several purposes. It validates our pain. God takes injustice seriously.

He's not telling us to just get over it. He sees every wound and promises that accounts will be settled. Second, bringing our anger to God prevents destructive action.

[27:10] When we give our anger to God, we're less likely to try to take matters into our own hands in ways that we'll regret later. Thirdly, bringing our anger to God begins the healing process.

Carrying a rage around inside us is exhausting. Entrusting it to God's capable hands starts to lift the burden from our shoulders.

But here is where the gospel transforms everything. As we bring our anger to God, we also remember God's incredible forgiveness towards us.

If you look at the next slide. This is a book I read a few years ago. It's written by a Cambodian called Riaqsa Him.

It's called The Tears of My Soul. His entire family was murdered by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in 1977. He watched helplessly as his father was clubbed to death with a hoe.

[28:22] What was his natural response? He said it was helpless rage and a vow of revenge. But then, Riaqsa became a Christian.

He says that the journey to forgiveness was long and very painful. It took many years. In 2003, he returned to Cambodia and he traced down the last surviving killer of his family.

But instead of seeking revenge, Riaqsa spoke of God's love and God's forgiveness. He says, By God's grace, I was able to forgive this man and set him free in my heart.

What enabled such supernatural transformation? It is that Riaqsa grasped the depth of God's grace towards him.

As Colossians chapter 3 puts it on the next slide. Let's read together after 3. 1, 2, 3. So the key insight is this.

[29:58] Our sin against God is worse than any crime committed against us. We have rebelled against God, our creator.

We have turned away from his love. We have made ourselves his enemy. Yet in God's grace, he has forgiven us completely through Christ's death on the cross.

Yet what I find is that sometimes we're a little bit confused about what forgiveness is. So let me just spend a minute or two thinking about this.

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean forgetting. Early we saw in verse 7 of our psalm that when the psalmist asked God to remember, he was asking him to act.

In the same way, when God promises in Jeremiah 31 that he will remember sins no more, it doesn't necessarily mean that he's developing amnesia.

[31:11] It means that God chooses not to act against us in judgment. So forgiveness isn't necessarily about erasing the memory of wrongs.

It's about choosing a new way to act in light of them. Two, forgiveness does not mean avoiding accountability.

Jesus himself established principles for confronting sin in Matthew chapter 18. The apostle Paul handed over sinning believers to church discipline, 1 Corinthians chapter 5.

So for example, if someone steals from BMKC Kuching, we can forgive them while still involving the police.

Romans 13.4 tells us that government authorities are God's servants to bring justice. So supporting accountability is biblical, not unforgiving.

[32:24] Three, what forgiveness does mean is releasing our right to personal vengeance. As we've already seen in Romans 12, vengeance belongs to God alone.

It means we stop poisoning ourselves with hatred. It means we entrust ultimate justice to God while still supporting the earthly justice systems he has established.

The difference is in our hearts. We can support justice without being consumed by vengeance.

We can remember wrongs without nursing bitterness. We can protect others from harm without seeking personal payback.

So this is the radical invitation of the gospel. God calls us to forgive, not because our enemies deserve it, but because God has forgiven us in Christ.

[33:32] As we grasp the magnitude of his grace toward us, we also find the supernatural ability to extend grace and forgiveness to others.

In this process, the Holy Spirit shapes us into the image of the one who, even on the cross, prayed, Father, forgive them.

So as a church, as BMKEC Kuching, you can walk this journey together. If you have anger and pain, you don't need to hide them from God.

Your anger at injustice may be righteous. You don't need to feel ashamed. But don't let these emotions control or consume you.

The path from anger to forgiveness is rarely quick. It's often a daily choice to release revenge and trust God with justice.

[34:45] Perhaps some days we'll make progress. Other days an old rage might resurface. That's normal. But we don't give up.

For God invites us into radical forgiveness. Not because enemies deserve it, but because God has forgiven us in Christ.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you with honest hearts. Some of us carrying pain and anger, we can barely contain.

Thank you that your word gives us permission to bring our rawest emotions to you. We confess that forgiveness feels impossible at times in our own strength.

We pray for and desperately need your Holy Spirit. For those of us carrying fresh wounds, grant courage to trust you.

[35:46] For those nursing old bitterness, give us strength to release it. Help us here as a family at BEMKEC, create a safe space for honest emotions while pointing each other to your abundant grace.

So please remind us daily of your forgiveness towards us. And as we grasp how much you've forgiven us in Christ, help us extend that same grace to others.

We trust your perfect justice and timing. Transform our healing, our anger into healing, and our bitterness into blessing.

For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.