

Our Heart's Cry for Justice

By Sam Williamson

Psalm 137

- 1 By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.
- 2 On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.
- 3 For there our captors required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth,
saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- 4 How shall we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
- 6 Let my tongue cleave
to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!
- 7 Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem,
how they said, "Raze it, raze it! Down to its foundations!"
- 8 O daughter of Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall he be who requites you
with what you have done to us!
- 9 Happy shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock!

I once heard Psalm 137 read during a Sunday morning service. The reader read the last verse, "Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" and then reader concluded with, "This is the word of the Lord." There was an audible gasp from the audience.

After all, isn't the word of the Lord love and mercy? How does that fit with wrath and justice? How can a loving God be just, and how can a wrathful God be merciful?

For my first four years of school, I was a good kid. I didn't speak out of turn, I finished my work on time, and I didn't pull girls' hair (at least the teacher never caught me). Until fifth grade.

On the first day of fifth grade my new teacher reviewed the class roster, and when she came to my name she literally shouted out, "Sam Williamson, stand up!" Then she

asked, “Is Andy Williamson your brother?” When I replied “yes,” she began yelling, “You shall not talk back to me, you shall not sneak out of class, you shall not shoot spitballs...” Then she moved a desk to a corner close to her desk, by itself, and she forcibly sat me in it.

When I got home I complained, “It isn’t fair.” And it wasn’t. Children of all ages (up to 80 years of age!) commonly cry out, “It isn’t fair! I want justice!” We humans, from the youngest grandchild to the oldest grandparent, have an innate urge for justice. Because we have all felt injustice.

For most of us, however, the injustice we’ve received has been relatively light: my teacher gave me the punishment my brother deserved; someone’s sister got a bigger piece of cake than he or she did; and some less deserving employee got the job promotion that you deserved.

Few of us have experienced the devastation and cruel injustice inflicted by conquering armies.

The songwriter of Psalm 137 passionately screams out for justice. At the time of this psalm, it was a common practice for armies to kill the children—literally to take little ones by the legs and dash their heads against a rock—and to rape and impregnate women. The poet saw this firsthand. Maybe his wife was raped and perhaps his child’s head was smashed against a rock.

The psalmist has seen his city conquered, the temple despoiled, and his friends and neighbors brutalized, and he has been forced to march on a grueling, almost thousand-mile trek. Then, as the train of captives arrives on the western banks of the Euphrates, within sight of the magnificent city of Babylon, the captors point to their glorious city, comparing it with Jerusalem and taunt, “Tell us again of your wonderful Jerusalem! What was *your* city like compared to *ours!*”

The white hot anger of the psalmist screams out. The volcanic lava of his wrath pours forth to God: “Happy will he be who does to you, Babylon, what you did to us; happy will he be who takes your little ones and dashes them upon the rocks.”

What can we say to victims of such unspeakable horror and injustice? The psalmist’s solution seems so awful, and yet we have a deep, visceral—even God-given—longing for justice.

Both conservatives and liberals offer solutions to this deep need for justice, and both answers fail. Can we appeal to a loving God for wrath and justice?

Today’s modern Liberal mind mutinies against a God of wrath and justice. A common phrase is, “I don’t like the idea of an angry God, I just believe in a God of love.” Our

modern culture claims that a certainty of a vengeful God will itself lead to more violence.

Miroslav Volf is a Croatian theologian who lived through the violence of the Balkans. He had friends and neighbors and relatives who suffered these same unspeakable, unjust horrors. In his book *Exclusion and Embrace* he says:

My thesis ... that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance, will not be popular in the United States. Violence thrives today secretly nourished by the belief that God refuses to take up the sword. It takes the quiet of a suburb for the birth of the thesis that human non-violence is the result of God who refuses to judge. In a scorched land soaked in the blood of the innocent that idea will invariably die like other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind. If God were not angry at injustice and deception ... that God would not be worthy of our worship.

Volf claims that only the “quiet of a suburb” leads people to believe in a God who refuses to judge. Because—for most of us—the injustice we have received is minor. We Western suburbanites have been saved from the brutality of eviscerated abdomens and raped daughters. From our place of wealth and security, we disdain the rest of the world’s intolerance and need for retribution. So we don’t need a God of vengeance.

Volf then declares that disbelief in a God of vengeance will lead to more violence, not less. If we live in a land “scorched and soaked in the blood of the innocent,” and if we doubt God will bring ultimate justice, then we will be forced to take up the sword ourselves. Because injustice needs an answer, and if God isn’t going to give it we must.

So, if there is no God of justice, what hope is there for the world?

On the other hand, today’s modern Conservative mind relishes the idea of a God of justice. “Give them what they deserve! They attacked us, so let’s teach them a lesson they’ll never forget. They made their bed, let them lie in it.”

The psalmist, however, is—or should be—conflicted. While the psalmist undoubtedly saw appalling injustice in the Babylonian conquest, the conquest was a direct result of Israel’s repeated rebellion against the Lord. The book of Isaiah (chapters 1-37) bristles with warnings of God’s coming judgments on Israel’s apostasy. Despite the Lord’s faithfulness, Israel incessantly committed adultery with other gods.

Scripture says we are to love the Lord with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. If we are honest with ourselves—and let’s start there!—we’ve never practiced that command for an hour in our lives. The God of all creation lovingly made us in his image, and he lovingly sustains us, minute by minute; while in much of our lives we simply ignore him.

If the entire earth began praying for complete justice this morning at 9:00, which of us would be alive at 9:01?

So, if there *is* a God of justice, what hope is there for us?

How do we resolve this biblical tension: the Lord is both a God of justice *and* the Lord is a God of mercy? If he is mostly merciful and not wrathful, what hope is there for the world? If he is mostly wrathful and not merciful, what hope is there for us?

These two seemingly contradictory themes in scripture meet and are fulfilled in the cross.

Jesus lived a perfect life—loving the Lord with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength—every minute of every hour of every day. He lived the life we should have lived. Perfectly.

And yet he suffered unutterable injustice: naked humiliation, vicious taunts, piercing agony, and absolute abandonment. He died the death we should have died.

Let us not pass on too quickly. From the very beginning, humans spat on the richness of God. From consuming the forbidden fruit to murder and adultery and idolatry we have been unjust to our creator. Every one of us. The blood of our rebellion soaks the earth, crying out to heaven for justice. Frankly, we deserve to be dashed against a rock.

And from the very beginning God has shown mercy. The only way Adam and Eve could have survived the first sin without instant death is if God had a plan from the beginning that could somehow reconcile complete justice with complete mercy; not a plan that merely compromised justice and mercy, but a plan that completely fulfilled justice and mercy.

And that plan was to bring his innocent son to earth to die as we deserve, so that the ultimate payment is made, and to live as we should have, so that he can give to us his perfect righteousness.

The Lord accomplished this because he himself had his little one dashed upon a rock—the death we ourselves deserve for our pride and rebellion—so that we could have the reward for the complete obedience his Son deserves: sonship and eternal life with the Father.

In this way, the Lord brought together and fulfilled the biblical themes of God's wrathful vengeance on all injustice and his mercy on all who call on his name. Who could have imagined such a glorious and beautiful act of justice and mercy? And who of us victims cannot now look at our unjust persecutors and beg mercy for them, for we know what we ourselves deserve?

Isn't our loving and just Father glorious!

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