

The hardest times in life are when we lose something special. In about two and a half months, I'm going to lose my singleness, and that will be difficult. No, just kidding. All joking aside, we have all lost something very important to us in one form or another. Loss takes several forms: we can lose a loved one, a pet, an ability, an identity, just about anything that we have grown attached to. Often we can knowingly or unknowingly categorize losses into tiers of importance or unimportance, but a loss is a loss. Any loss affects us. The loss of a pet can strike us just as hard as the loss of a member of the family. Losses occur in so many forms, some that we don't realize until we are in the midst of that loss. There are many ways of coping, but the worst way to cope is to deny and smash down all the emotions that naturally come. We can either deal with the emotions on their terms or have them come out in unexpected and difficult ways later down the road. Psalm 137 is one example of dealing with an incapacitating loss, a loss that delves down to the deepest part of what it means to worship God. It's a loss so difficult you don't know what to do.

Psalm 137 is probably the most disturbing psalm in the Bible. It is rooted in the trials of the exile of the Kingdom of Judah to Babylon, in roughly 586 BC. Babylon came and took out Jerusalem, a city that the people thought would always be there based because of how they interpreted God's promises. In this time, the people were not occupied in their land but removed from it and sent to a foreign land. Since so much of their identity as worshippers of the LORD was tied to the land and the temple in Jerusalem, the people are lost, confused, angry. It would be fair to say that they don't know who they are anymore. Jerusalem was the center of their lives as a people and it was destroyed by a hostile army.

Psalm 137 is a lament, a kind of grief. Lamentation stems away from what we know as grief by sounding a bit more extreme than just tears. Lamentation can be more raw,

more frank, more rough than we usually envision in grief. According to one of my professors, Dr. Larry Graham, lament has three specific functions: it helps one re-establish their confidence and equilibrium after a loss. It helps re-establish community that was broken from a loss. Also, it allows us to question God when we are unsure of our previous knowledge, which is a perfectly human thing to do after our previous human understanding has been blown away. As someone once put it, God is big enough to take it. When we experience lament, we find that we are on a journey, and, over time, that journey will lead us to a new normal. It will bring about a new individual, a renewed community, and a renewed faith in and understanding of how God works. The old normal can never come back, but we find a new sense of wholeness that accepts the emptiness left by the loss in our lives. The author of this psalm laments in a dark tone, mourning the loss of Jerusalem, the ever-blessed city of God. It does not seek to hold on to the past, but names that Jerusalem will always be an important part of life. We cannot see the author's journey, only how the author expresses emotion.

I think one thing this psalm raises is the darkness of violence in the Bible. We cannot ignore anything that the Bible says, but we must find a way to negotiate and address it constructively. The last line of Psalm 137 is not a line that can be dismissed easily or forgotten. However, we can see how the Psalm shifts from verses 1-6, when the tone is sadness, to verses 7-9 when it shifts to the author's vengefulness against those who have done them wrong. Part of the task of grief and lament is to release those emotions inside, whatever they may be, in a constructive way. It is natural to have vengeful or angry feelings with losses, but that does not translate into acting upon them justifiably. I do not

believe this statement receives God's blessing for any action, but that the author needed to expel this emotion. There it is. We have our dark emotions, but they are never acted upon.

This psalm will always be dark and disturbing every time we come to it, but we need psalms like this. We will walk through darkness at various points in our lives without our control, and that's natural. We can't run toward the light until we walk through that darkness; we need the darkness to fully appreciate the light. Church should be a place where we can praise and worship in happiness while also being an asylum of support when life seems full of darkness. This psalm is a reminder that we will have parts of our lives when we carry anger and frustration, but we need to vent it without acting upon it in ways that cannot be healed. This is the point of lamentation, for the venting and releasing of such intense emotion will eventually lead to new, revived life. The writer of Psalm 137 continued to mourn what had been and was no more: the temple was gone; the people weren't even tied to their land anymore. They were struggling to understand God and how to worship God with everything they thought they knew gone. For them, it couldn't really get any darker. Even when life seems at its darkest, we were created to feel deeply and to express those feelings. God is with us, even when we question, even when we cry, even when we speak out of anger. These are perfectly natural things. What is not natural is to bottle these things up, for they will come out in more uncontrolled ways than we would like. In this time of Lent, when we seek how we be faithful to God's calling as God's followers and as God's creation, let us seek to name our losses as they come and to walk that journey of grief in order that we may find the new life that comes about at the end of that road, as difficult as that struggle may be. God walks with us in our journey to love and nurture us, just as God was with the people in Babylon in their journey. Amen and Amen.