

## 2020-10-04 Emotions in Exile, Part One: Hatred and Anger

### *Emotions in Exile, Part One: Hatred and Anger*

October 4, 2020

Pastor Scott Austin

[artisanchurch.com](http://artisanchurch.com)

[Music Intro]

[Male voice] The following is a presentation of Artisan Church in Rochester, New York.

[Voice of Pastor Scott]

Thanks Jenna for leading us in that prayer and I thanks Dave for making some music for us, and thanks to all of you who have continued to make these Zoom and Facebook services work for us during this season. Before I get into what I want to share with you this morning, a couple quick things. I wanted to say thanks to those of you who participated in our cider days food drive yesterday. One of the saddest things about this. Covid-19 quarantine era is that we had to cancel our happiest day of the year, our fall Cider Days festival. But we made the best of it by getting together, a few people at a time, outdoors, to drop off food to support St Peter's kitchen. And we have many boxes of food that will be going over there this week, and we're so thankful to those of you who are able to participate in that way.

The second thing is, I want to tell you that if you have not yet watched the video or read the transcript of the video that I made a little over a week ago with some thoughts on the possibility of a partial phased reopening, I would encourage you to do that. And while you are there at that page you can - here, I'm going to put the link into the zoom chat so don't don't go watch it right now, I've got other things to say - but if you haven't done that yet I encourage you to do that. Several dozen of you have completed the survey that is linked on that page sharing your thoughts with the church and with our leadership about the possibility of returning to an in person Artisan experience with certain limitations. And it's very soon going to be time to start processing the responses to that survey which is a seriously big task itself and so we are going to be forming a little bit of a task force, if you will, to process that information and it will include some staff and leadership team members but we would like to get as broad a representation of the Artisan community as possible because there are so there are many decisions that will need to be made if we decide to go forward with any sort of reopening. And that's not a foregone conclusion by the way. So if you think that you have the emotional capacity right now to speak into that process into those potential decisions I'd like to hear from you and so you can sort of apply to be on that team. I know that there are many people who

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have expressed that interest, that's why I say the word "apply" to be on that team. We're going to try to have as representative a group as possible to be processing that information, so please send me an e-mail, it's Scott@ArtisanChurch.com, and I will share that with the folks who are putting that team together. And we would love to have your feedback on those things. And then, lastly, before I get going with my sermon such as it is today, I want to remind you that we will be taking communion together virtually following that time. And so if you have something nearby or already that's great. If you need to step away to go get something you can we're being very lenient with the requirements about the elements here. It's a wonderful and confusing blend of very very high sacramental theology and very low whatever you've got nearby theology. So you can get some bread and wine or juice and, or something as close to that as you can get and we will do a virtual Communion for that later. It is world communion day today, I'm told, so maybe more people than usual will be trying this today.

So. When I was a kid I developed a technique for dealing with my anger. So you know how when you're - certainly not true for any adults right? But when you're a child sometimes the anger just bubbles up in you and you don't know how to, to deal with it. So I figured out this technique that I have since shared with other people which is to scream into a pillow. I'm not kidding. This actually works really well if you are very very upset or angry and you feel like you need to let it out but you can't because of, you know, decorum, or because you don't want to hurt the hearing in the ears of the people around you. You can actually take a pillow and put it right up against your face and scream into the pillow and it will contain your scream. Not 100 percent contain it, but it will definitely make it a more pleasant scream for those around you without reducing the therapeutic benefits of screaming when you are really upset or angry.

Later in life I was at a conference as an adult and there was a speaker at this conference who led a kind of quasi monastic community in Seattle and she talked about a prayer technique that she had developed for the people in this community that involved smashing plates. And I decided to try that the next time I felt very very upset and angry. You have to you have to be a little bit intentional about when and where and how you do this activity because of course you don't want to hurt anybody but if you can find a contained area such as she had built into her monastic community where you can take a plate that you don't need anymore and really just destroy it. That's actually also a pretty effective way of getting some of that feeling out. These are activities that allowed me as a child and then later as an adult to express my anger for quite fully without having to restrain it too much. So with that in mind I want to transition to today's biblical text and it's one that I think is going to be potentially very challenging for some of us if you've never read this text before or heard it read. It may cause you some distress and that's that's actually intentional. So I just want to give you a little bit of a content warning ahead of

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time that that may be your experience with this. And I'm going to give you a chance after I read the text to tell me, in the chat, how it makes you feel. So be aware of how this biblical text makes you feel. This is Psalm 137.

*By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps for there our captors asked us for songs and our tormentors asked for mirth saying: sing us one of the songs of Zion. How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you oh Jerusalem let my right hand wither, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. Remember oh Lord against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem's fall. How they said: tear it down tear down down to its foundations! Oh daughter Babylon you devastator. Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us, happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock.*

So tell me in the chat how does that song make you feel, and I'll read it out. And if you prefer to say it anonymously you can send it to me directly as a direct message and I won't mention your name. Melody says that makes me feel confused. Ok thank you. Avila says sad. Sad and vengeful. Reassured. Interesting, thank you Craig. Relatable says Doug. "Brain match Melody!" from Kristen. Well, you two are on the same wavelength. Feeling confused. Disturbed. Yes, I see some heads nodding at disturbed. By the way, if you're worshipping with us on Facebook you can be responding in the chat too. There's sometimes a little sub community of chat text that happens on Facebook and that's ok I just don't have access to it to call it out into the... into the rest of the room. Understood. You feel understood. Interesting. You know so I got a private message that said: "Conflicted. On one hand I don't like the idea of violence against children, on the other hand I understand the anger against injustice felt in this passage." Yeah. Thank you for that and thanks to all of you for sharing your response to that Psalm. You can continue to have that conversation if you'd like, I'm going to turn my attention away from the chat now, but feel free to keep talking with each other as I'm talking with all of you.

Today's sermon is part one of what will be a two part sermon about the emotions of exile. So today is Part One. Part two of this will be actually in two weeks, I'm going to go back to Exodus in between. So we were thinking during this season about the seasons that the Israelites went through of exile and of exodus and how those might be instructive for us or helpful to us in our own season of feeling very up rooted and disoriented and all the things that we're feeling right now. And so let's talk about the context for Psalm 137. You've - some of you've already picked up on the fact that this Psalm was written at the very beginning of the exile. So what had just happened when the Psalmist was writing this, or when some of what the Psalmist is imagining

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having just happened when they wrote this song? Well, the Babylonians had come through and conquered what was left of Israel, right? There had only been one partial conquest and in this case they not only conquered the remaining people but that they destroyed the temple. So that talk about, you know, tear it down to its foundations, is talking about the holiest location in the entire Israelite world and imagining having the temple destroyed, the people had been carried out into exile, taken out of their homeland, their... the only place they knew, and banished basically from from that place and then... You can probably fill in some of the most distressing details of that by knowing that this was war in the 8th century B.C. or 6th century - excuse me. So all of the plundering and pillaging everything that goes along with that had just happened to these people. And so I wonder. I wonder, does that change how you feel about the song at all if you didn't know that context before? You don't have to answer that one of the chat unless you want to. But that last line of Psalm 137 which I actually think is one of the most difficult and disturbing sentences in the entire Bible: "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock" becomes perhaps a little bit more understandable if you think about the fact that this very thing had probably just happened to some of the little ones of Israel.

Now you might say: Well, wishing death and pain upon your enemies is not very Christ like. And you would be right. Of course it's not Christ like but what I think is really important to know is that it is extremely human. And that actually it is also biblical, right? Now you know if you've heard me talk about the Bible for very long that I love many things about the Bible but I do not like when people use the word biblical as an adjective. I think that that is more often than not, well, lazy or manipulative, you know, at its worst. But it is biblical in the sense that we find this actual thing in the Bible: Wishing death and pain upon your enemies. And so what we have to, of course, realize, is that not everything in the Bible is Christ like. But there's a whole category of Psalms of this type they're called imprecatory Psalms, right? So if you've never seen that word I'll put it in the chat: imprecatory. This is a spoken curse, right? There's probably not a clear way to say it, it's a curse. The word literally means to invoke evil and so if it's not Christ like, what purpose does this type of song serve? I think the one thing that's helpful to think about is that the Psalms are the basis for prayer. I have talked about this already, in fact, I'm pretty sure I kicked off the exile exodus thing with some of some observations about this. The idea that the Psalms are the basis for our prayer means that we have words in scripture which we can use to give voice to the deepest human emotions that we have. In a time like this when we are maybe feeling more emotions or feeling our emotions more deeply or feeling different emotions than we are accustomed to feeling, it's very helpful to have a vocabulary at our disposal as people of God that can be used as the basis for our prayer. And this is something that maybe, maybe some of us are not very experienced at. I was going to say that we're not good at, but that's the wrong word because I think it's maybe that we haven't even given this

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kind of thing a chance. But what I want to say to you is that prayer can be a container for our anger and our rage and even for our hatred.

That's why I started our service by trying to assure you that God is able to contain all of the range of feelings that you are having today - that you've been having this week - that you've been having this month - that you've been having this year. Prayer can be a container for all of these feelings including anger - including our hatred. Prayer can be like a pillow for our souls to scream into. I think we don't do ourselves any good service when we...when we censor ourselves in prayer and we say: oh I couldn't possibly say that to God! Saying I feel X Y and Z but I'm not going to include that in my prayer because really I'm worried about lightning bolts, right? Because many of us still believe that the triune God best revealed to us in Jesus Christ is actually Zeus. Miroslav Volf said it this way and I've made a slide for this quotation so that you can see it, and he's kind of riffing on how to think about the imprecatory Psalms. "How to reconcile imprecatory Psalms and forgiveness." He says "Such Psalms are prayers we bring to God our rage at the evil done, our impulse to destroy the evil doer, and leave it before God. And for Christians that means we put them under the cross of Christ, who forgave his executioners." Now, again I've hinted at this fairly recently, but I think it bears repeating. It is probably not possible for us to skip the first part of what Volf is describing there in our effort to rush to the second part.

Which is to say we all know that we're supposed to forgive our enemies. That we are supposed to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus, right? We all know that's the Christian calling, and we find ourselves unable to do it. I think sometimes the reason that we find ourselves unable to do it is because we do not participate in that first step of what he's describing. We do not allow ourselves to pray the imprecatory Psalms. What does it look like to make a prayer that says I wish pain on someone? I wish the worst type of pain on my enemies. Well, a lot of times we don't want to even allow the possibility to enter our mind. So this is a very emotional time. This time of quasi exile that we are living in certainly is not exactly like what the Israelites experienced, but it is a version of it. We're feeling sadness, we're feeling fear, we're feeling grief and worry and despair. And yes there's some good sprinkled in there as well. I know that sometimes you're experiencing joy and happiness and hopefulness. I certainly want to affirm that and encourage that but I don't want to - I don't miss a lot of each other and and not admit that we're feeling all these other negative emotions. And it's possible that for some time now maybe especially over the last several days you've been experiencing a lot of anger and even rage. By the way this may be especially true for men given how culture conditions us, but I would encourage you to watch out for the possibility that what you are actually feeling is

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sadness or grief or fear and that you're expressing them is anger because you consider those other emotions to be weaker but that's a whole separate sermon.

What I want to observe is that we in the Christian church are often so preoccupied with being Christ like that we prohibit ourselves from being human - or we try to anyway. But the problem is that that doesn't actually work and so we will never make our way to being Christ like, because we have not allowed ourselves to be fully human. So we never find a container for our rage at injustice. We never find that pillow for our souls to scream into because we don't think we're allowed to. Which means we never get a chance to leave it before God, as Volf said which means that we can never move toward a Christ like posture toward injustice. And so I think our tendency probably very often is to avoid the imprecatory Psalms. To say: I cannot deal with that right now, that's just going to trigger me, that's just going to send me off into worse feelings than I'm already experiencing. And I want to suggest to you that praying those imprecatory Psalms is the way to move through that process and to move past that feeling. And that actually it's not just something to make you feel better, although it might very well have that effect, but that it's a necessary part of getting to the place where we can actually be part of changing the world into the world that God dreams for us to have. I would propose that it's difficult or possibly impossible - maybe impossible - to get to that place if we skip that important step.

And so I'll leave you with a quotation from St Augustine who said: "Hope has two lovely daughters, anger and courage. Anger to see what things are and courage to change what they are." So I do not usually give you homework on Sundays, especially lately, you know, it's a tough time we're all trying to have Zoom meetings for work, we're all trying to, if we have kids, get them doing their school on Zoom. We're all trying to make it through from one day to the next. But if you allow me to assign you a little bit of a homework assignment this week here's what it is: I would like you to write your own imprecatory Palm. What would a Psalm look like if you were to write it without censoring yourself? Without dismissing the worst feelings that you have as unholy or inappropriate? Would you write that Palm and then, once it's written down, would you actually make it a prayer? It's a difficult homework assignment. This is not an easy one. If you can't do it, remember that a lot of them have already been written down for you. That's, that's kind of the point of what I've been saying about Psalms is that when you can give voice to your own feelings you can use the words that already gave voice to those same feelings when someone else had them. So you could read Psalm 137 as a prayer. If you did a simple Google search for imprecatory Psalms - I already wrote the word in the chat so you can just copy and paste it - you'd find a number of other examples. Perhaps that would be easier than writing your own. But I do encourage you in one or the other of those forms this week to allow yourself to inhabit the deepest, ugliest, emotions that you are experiencing. To scream into that

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pillow - spiritually speaking - because I think that's how you find yourself coming into contact with that other daughter: courage. Bless you, amen

[End of sermon]

[Male voice] For more information, visit us at [ArtisanChurch.com](https://www.ArtisanChurch.com).