

Rehema Christian Center
Tuesday and Wednesday Bible Study (April 30 & May 1)
PSALM 137
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SONG – RIVERS OF BABYLON

By the Rivers of Babylon, where we sat down and there
we wept when we remembered Zion. (repeat 2x)

When the wicked carried us away in captivity required from us a song.
Now, how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land? (repeat 1x)

So let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my
heart be accepted in thy sight tonight. (repeat 2x)

By the Rivers of Babylon where we sat down and there
we wept when we remembered Zion.

When the wicked carried us away in captivity required from us a song.
Now how shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land. (repeat 2x)

Introduction

Imagine being forced to leave behind everything you know and love, your home, your community, your way of life. How would you feel? What would you miss the most? Today, we’re looking into Psalm 137, a powerful expression of loss and longing from the perspective of the Israelites during their exile in Babylon.

This psalm captures the heartache of a people stripped of their homeland and their identity, symbolized by the loss of their song. It’s a psalm of lament. In the Bible, laments are often poetic expressions of pain and anguish addressed to God. They usually include:

1. **Invocation:** Calling on God for His help.
2. **Complaint:** Expressing the cause of distress or problem.
3. **Petition/Request:** Requesting divine intervention or assistance.
4. **Confidence in God:** Affirming trust in God's faithfulness and justice.

5. **Vow of Thanksgiving:** Pledging gratitude and worship regardless of circumstances.

The author of this Psalm of lamentation is unknown and is believed to be a Levite. The Psalm is divided into three sections.

Verses 1-3: Complaint of the Israelites

Verses 4-6: Determination to Keep Faith Alive in a Foreign Land

Verses 7-9: Plea for Divine Retribution Against Enemies

Historical Background

The Israelites were the descendants of Abraham. Deuteronomy 7:6 says, ***“For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth. God’s special treasure in the earth.”***

God had promised the seed of Abraham the land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey. The promise was eternal and unconditional. However, the actual possession and control of the land by the Israelites was based upon their faithfulness to God.

At this time, the Israelites were not in Canaan but captives in Babylon. Why were they captives and not enjoying the land flowing with milk and honey? They were unfaithful to God and insisted on worshipping idols.

As God’s chosen people in the earth, they were to be a witness to the one true God in a world of polytheism and idolatry. This special people came through the seed of Abraham. Abraham gave birth to Isaac. Isaac gave birth to Jacob. Jacob wrestles with the angel and his name was changed to Israel.

Israel gives birth to 12 sons. Joseph, one of those sons of Israel, was sold into Egypt. He becomes an official in Egypt and saves his family back in Canaan from a famine. As a result of the famine, Jacob and his entire household of 70 move to Egypt. This was orchestrated by God for the preservation of the nation of Israel.

As time goes on, Joseph and the Pharaoh die. Another Pharaoh who did not know Joseph comes to power and enslaves the children of Israel for 400 years. God sends Moses to deliver them from bondage. Three months into their freedom journey, God gives them the 10 commandments. The first two commandments

were ***“You shall have no other gods before Me, and you shall not make idols.”***
(Ex. 20:2-17)

In Deuteronomy 28, God promises the Israelites abundant blessings if they faithfully obey His commandments, follow His laws, and remain loyal to Him. On the other hand, if they disobey God's commandments and turn away from Him, they are warned of severe consequences in the form of curses which included ***exile from the Promised Land.***

However, Israel did not heed God’s warnings. God sent His prophets to Israel warning them of their idolatrous ways, but they would not obey. As a result, the ***Northern Kingdom*** was taken into captivity by Assyrians in 722 BCE and the ***Southern Kingdom*** was taken into captivity by the Babylonians about 100 years later in three separate campaigns.

Nebuchadnezzar's Campaigns Against Judah, the Southern Kingdom:

- The first campaign occurred in 605 BCE when Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem and took members of the royal family and nobility into captivity, including Daniel and his companions.
- The second campaign, in 597 BCE, resulted in the capture of Jerusalem and the deportation of more Judeans, including the prophet, Ezekiel.
- Finally, in 586 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar's third campaign resulted in the complete destruction of Jerusalem, including its temple, and the exile of a significant portion of the population to Babylon.

The prophet Jeremiah told them they would remain in Babylon for 70 years and that God would bring them out at the proper time. ***“Jeremiah advises the exiles to settle down in Babylon, build homes, plant gardens, marry, and have children.”***
(Jer. 29:4-7).

In other words, they were not to expect a swift return but rather to adapt to their circumstances, build lives in Babylon, ***and continue to trust in God's promises for their future restoration.*** This instruction underscores the importance of faithfulness, perseverance, and trust in God's timing, even during difficult and uncertain circumstances.

Complaint of the Israelites

So, here we are in Babylon. Verse 1 begins, as they sat “**By the rivers of Babylon . . .we wept when we remembered Zion.**” Remembering is important because it connects us to our past, our heritage and our identity. When they thought about Zion, which was a symbol of the promised land and the presence of God, they wept.

- They wept over the destroyed city of Jerusalem and the great temple.
- They wept over the agony of a forced march from Judea to Babylon.
- They wept over the cruelty of their captors.
They wept over the death of so many loved ones.
- They wept over the loss of almost everything they owned.
They wept over the bleak nature of their future.
- They wept over their sin that invited such judgment from God.
- Some of them undoubtedly:
 - Felt a separation from God,
 - Had feelings of emptiness,
 - Wrested with spiritual unrest, and
 - Lacked purpose and meaning of life.

Because Israel’s joy was gone, they hung, they their harps on willow trees. The NIV says in verse 2, “**There on the poplars we hung our harps...**”

The harp was a musical instrument commonly associated with worship and celebration in Jewish culture. By hanging their harps, the Israelites expressed their inability and unwillingness to find joy or engage in music in their current state of exile and sadness. Nevertheless, they did not break their harps in pieces or throw them in the stream. Instead, they hung them on the poplars or willow trees believing that there would be a better day. (**Strong faith, wavering faith, no faith**)

NOTE: When God saves you, He does not fix you where you cannot sin anymore, but He fixes you where **you cannot sin and enjoy it anymore**. God loves you too much to let you live in Babylon (world) and still have joy in your heart.

3 “For there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’”

The Babylonians knew how the Jews honored Mount Zion and the city of Jerusalem and how they boasted of Zion’s strength and security, but now, the city

and temple were in ruins. In their sarcasm, the guards were asking, “Where is your God! Why didn’t He deliver you!

It's like being in a sad situation and someone expects you to put on a happy face, even though you're hurting inside. It's hard to do something joyful when you're feeling sad or disconnected from where you belong.

Determination to Keep Faith Alive in a Foreign Land

"4 How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land.

The foreign land is Babylon. For us, a foreign land could symbolize a state of spiritual alienation or separation from God. It might represent a period in one's life where one might feel distant from their faith, disconnected from their spiritual roots, or estranged from God's presence.

Just as the Israelites longed for their homeland while in Babylonian captivity, individuals experiencing spiritual exile may yearn to return to a closer relationship with their beliefs, values, and divine connection. This sense of displacement can arise from various factors such as doubt, sin, suffering, or a lack of spiritual nourishment.

Whatever the cause of your foreign land experience remember God is faithful and full of mercy. His compassion never fails. If you need a word of encouragement, God’s got it. If you have lost your song because of sin, God can fix it. I John 1:9 tells us, ***“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.***

Verse 5 says, ***“If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.”***

This verse portrays the intense devotion and loyalty of the psalmist to Jerusalem, the holy city. The psalmist declares that even if they were to forget Jerusalem, may their hand lose its ability to play music or skillfully perform tasks. It reflects the importance of keeping their faith.

It serves as a reminder of the importance of staying true to God’s word, even in the face of challenges or pressures to conform to worldliness.

Verse 6 says, ***“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.”***

The psalmist continues to express Israel's unwavering devotion to Jerusalem. They declare that if they do not remember Jerusalem or fail to prioritize it as their greatest source of joy, may their tongue stick to the roof of their mouth, rendering them unable to speak. It reflects the depths of their despair and their desperate plea for God's intervention in the face of injustice and suffering.

Plea for Divine Retribution Against Enemies

In verses 7-9, you can see the vengeful desire of the Israelites.

- The lament shifts to a cry for vengeance against their enemies.
- It calls for retribution, wishing harm upon Babylon's children.

Verse 7 says, "***Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. 'Tear it down,' they cried, 'tear it down to its foundations!'***"

The Edomites were a sister-nation to Israel, having descended from Esau, the brother of Jacob (Israel). They should have supported and sympathized with Jerusalem when the Babylonians came against it. But instead, they enjoyed Jerusalem's agony and wanted the city destroyed.

Obadiah criticized Edom for its failure to help Judah during its time of distress and gloating over Judah's misfortune and participating in the plundering of Jerusalem. God would send his judgment for their failure to help their brother.

Verse 8 says, "***Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us.***"

The sentiment expressed in the verse reflects the Israelites' longing for justice and vindication. They have endured suffering and humiliation at the hands of the Babylonians, and they yearn for retribution. The Psalmist finds a sense of satisfaction in the thought of Babylon receiving punishment proportional to the harm inflicted upon the Israelites.

Verse 9: "***Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.***"

This imagery of violence reflects the depth of the psalmist's anguish and desire for revenge against Babylon by inflicting harm upon its infants. It reflects the raw emotions of the psalmist. While this verse may have served as a cathartic

expression of the psalmist's emotions in a time of great distress, it does not prescribe or endorse such actions as morally acceptable. This behavior is not acceptable under any situation.

The New Testament calls us to a higher standard: "Our response should be to recognize that our calling, since the cross, is to pray for reconciliation, not judgment and to forgive not seek vengeance.

God's word teaches about vengeance and emphasizes the importance of forgiveness:

God's Perspective on Vengeance:

- Romans 12:19 (NIV) states, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." Vengeance belongs to God, not to humans. Believers are to trust in God's justice rather than seeking revenge themselves.

The Importance of Forgiveness:

- In Matthew 18:21-22 (NIV), Jesus teaches about the importance of extending forgiveness generously: "Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'"

Conclusion

Psalm 137 serves as a timeless reminder of the human experience of suffering, longing, and the enduring hope found in God's presence and promises. By reflecting on its message, we can find encouragement and guidance for navigating our own journeys through life's challenges.

TAKEAWAYS

1. **Honest Expression of Emotion:** This Psalm exemplifies the honesty and raw emotion found throughout the Psalms. It shows that it's okay to bring our deepest feelings, including anger and despair, before God. Even in our

darkest moments, we can turn to Him in prayer. 1 Peter 5:7 tells us to “. . .*cast all your care upon Him, for He cares for you*”.

2. **Seeking God's presence in difficult times:** Despite their suffering, the Israelites did not lose faith in God. They continued to remember Zion and express their desire for God's presence and deliverance. Similarly, we can turn to God for comfort and strength during our own trials and tribulations.

3. **Response of Faith:** The psalm ends with a note of faithfulness to Jerusalem and a commitment to remember God's promises. This serves as a reminder that even during suffering, we can cling to our faith and trust in God's faithfulness.

4. **Prayer for Enemies:** While the psalm expresses a desire for vengeance, it's important to note that Jesus teaches us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44). As Christians, we are called to extend grace and forgiveness, even to those who have wronged us.

WHAT IS YOUR TAKEAWAY?

Sources:

The Enduring Word Commentary by David Guzik
Be Exultant, Psalm 90-150 by Warren W. Wiersbe
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