

Psalm 137

The mourning of the exiles in Babylon

Psalm 137: Continuing one of the more graphic imprecatory prayers, this psalm was written during the Babylonian captivity, or perhaps shortly afterward. It contains a cry in captivity (verses 1-4), a vow of remembrance (verses 5-6), and a prayer for judgment (verses 7-9). On the subject of imprecations (see the note on Psalm 109). The vividness of the final verse is justified if one remembers a simple fact: baby Babylonians grow up to be big Babylonians. The hope that their babies will die is the prayer that no new Babylonian generation will arise seeking worldwide dominion through cruel oppression.

Verses 1-9: A psalm, explicitly about the Babylonian captivity of Judah. Its author and date are unknown.

- I. Lamentations (137:1-4);
- II. Conditions (137:5-6);
- III. Imprecations (137:7-9).

Verses 1-9: This psalm of grief recalls the lonely and desolate lives of the Israelites while in captivity in “Babylon”. The people longed for their native land and longed for God to remember the wrongs done to Jerusalem when it was destroyed. The Israelites even “hanged” their harps, their instruments of praise, because their sorrow was so deep.

Psalm 137:1 "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion."

“The rivers of Babylon”: The Tigris and Euphrates Rivers.

“We wept”: They even wept when the exile was over and the second temple was being built (compare Ezra 3:12), so deep was their sorrow.

“Zion”: The dwelling place of God on earth (Psalms 9:11; 76:2), which was destroyed by the Babylonians (2 Chron. 36:19; Psalms 74:6-8; 79:1; Isa. 64:10-11; Jer. 52:12-16; Lam. 2:4, 6-9; Micah 3:12).

This Psalm tells of the captivity of the children of Israel in Babylon. When they stopped and thought back of their homeland, the main thing that came to their remembrance was their place of worship. This weeping was for remembering Zion. One of the saddest things a person can feel, is their separation from their place of worship. We know that in many countries of the world there has been a time when Christians could not come to their place of worship. What a sad remembrance. I look back over the things that have changed our churches, and I weep as these did who sat by the river in Babylon. The world today, has turned to a Babylon. The church is really being pushed out of the main stream.

Psalm 137:2 "We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof."

“Hanged our harps”: In captivity, there was no use for an instrument of joy (compare Isa. 24:8).

These were harps that they had played joyfully in their temple. They might as well be hanging in a tree for what good they could do for them.

Psalm 137:3 "For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us [required of us] mirth, [saying], Sing us [one] of the songs of Zion."

“Carried us away captive”: The Babylonians taunted the Jews to sing of their once beautiful, but now destroyed, Zion.

“The songs of Zion” (compare Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122).

What an even more hurtful thing to do. The songs would not be joyful in captivity. To be forced to be cheerful does not work. The singing of the songs that had brought such joy in the temple, would now bring sad memories.

Psalm 137:4 "How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?"

“How shall we sing”: A rhetorical question whose answer is, “We can’t!”

“The LORD’s song”: A unique way to refer to divine inspiration of the psalms.

The song they were trying to get them to sing was a song that had been part of the worship service of the temple. It might even be thought of being disrespectful to God to sing this song in a heathen land.

Verses 5-6: Their refusal to sing was not caused by either of 2 unthinkable situations:

- (1) They forgot Jerusalem;
- (2) They did not have Jerusalem as their chief joy.

The worst of punishments should be imposed if any one or a combination of these factors were to become true.

Psalm 137:5 "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget [her cunning]."

The meaning here is, that to sing in such circumstances would seem to imply that they had forgotten Jerusalem. That they were unmindful of its sorrows, and cared not that it was desolate. The remembrance of its calamities pressed hard upon them, and they could not do anything which would seem to imply that they had become unmindful of the sufferings that had come upon their nation. One will not make merry when a wife or child lies dying, or on the day of the funeral, or over the grave of a mother. A joyous and brilliant party, accompanied with music, feasting, and dancing, when a friend has been just laid in the grave. When the calamities of war

are abroad. When the pestilence is raging in a city, we feel to be untimely, unseemly, and incongruous. So these captives said it would be if they should make merry while their temple was in ruins. While their city was desolate. While their people were captives in a foreign land.

"Let my right hand forget her cunning": Let my right hand forget its skill in music, all its skill. If I should now play on the harp, as indicative of joy, let the hand which would be employed in sweeping over its strings become paralyzed and powerless. Let the punishment come where it would seem to be deserved, on the hand which could play at such a time. So, Cranmer held the hand which had been employed in signing a recantation of his faith in the fire, until it was burned off, and dropped in the flames.

The Jewish people have always thought of Jerusalem as their homeland. Their loyalty, even if they are citizens in another land, has always been to Jerusalem, their holy city. The psalmist, here is just saying that it is more likely that he would forget how to use his right hand than it is that he would forget Jerusalem. All Jewish people have a soft place in their heart for Jerusalem. This would be magnified here, because they were captives.

Psalm 137:6 "If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy."

In prayer, in discourse, in conversation. This is the same as before, to forget, repeated for the confirmation of it.

"Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth": As is the case of a person in a fever, or in a violent thirst, which is to be in great distress (Psalm 18:6). The sense is, let me have no use of my tongue. Let me be dumb and speechless, and never sing a song or speak a word more, should I be so forgetful of the deplorable state of Jerusalem as to sing songs at such a season, and in an enemy's country.

"If I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy": Meaning not God his exceeding joy (Psalm 43:4). As his Creator, preserver, and benefactor, and much less as his covenant God and Father. As having loved him with an everlasting love. As the God of all grace unto him, and as his portion and exceeding great reward. Nor Christ, the object of joy unspeakable and full of glory; joy in the greatness, glory, and fullness of his person. In the blessings and promises of his grace; in what he has done and suffered. As risen, ascended, exalted, and who will come a second time. Nor the joy of the Holy Ghost in a way of believing, and in hope of the glory of God. But all worldly joy, or matter of it. And this not in things sinful, nor merely such as a worldly person has in the increase of their substance. But a lawful joy, such as in the health, happiness, and prosperity of a man's family, wife, and children, and his own. Which is the greatest outward joy a man can have. And yet the church of God and interest of Christ are preferred by a good man to these (see 1 Sam. 4:19). Which appears when all a man has that his matter of joy is sacrificed for the public good and interest of religion. When he can take no comfort in any outward enjoyment because of the sad case of Zion (Mal. 2:3). When joy for its good is uppermost, and is first in his thoughts and words. When this is the "head" or "beginning" of his joy, as it may be rendered. So Pindar calls the chief, principal, and greatest part of joy, The beginning of joy, the top and perfection of it.

This is about the same thing as the verse above, except instead of forgetting how to use his right hand, he is saying here, he would be unable to talk. Jerusalem is the very center of his heart's desire.

A few years ago, we were forced by things beyond our control to leave a church that had meant so very much to us. It was like these Jewish people spoken of here. There just seemed to be no joy in anything we did. To lose one's special place of worship is pretty close to the feelings you have in the death of a loved one.

Psalm 137:7 "Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase [it], rase [it, even] to the foundation thereof."

“The children of Edom”: Edomites had been allied with the Babylonians in the fall and destruction of Jerusalem (compare Isa. 21:11-12; Jer. 49:7-12; Lam. 4:21; Ezek. 25:12-14; 35:1-15; Obadiah chapters 11 to 14). The psalmist only prayed for that which the Lord had always promised.

“The day of Jerusalem”: The day Jerusalem was destroyed (see notes on Psalm 137:1).

Edom had been opposed to Israel ever since the days of Jacob and Esau. It seems that when Jerusalem was overthrown, that the Edomites wanted it to be totally destroyed. Even though they were relatives, they hated each other. Those same people are still having trouble today, over Israel.

Verses 8-9: “Happy ... shall he be”: For these will be God’s human instruments used to carry out His prophesied will for the destruction of Babylon.

Psalm 137:8 "O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy [shall he be], that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us."

By the determinate counsel and decree of God, and according to divine predictions (see Jer. 50:1). So mystical Babylon, antichrist, and the man of sin, who therefore is called the son of perdition (2 Thess. 2:3). Because appointed to destruction, and shall certainly go into it (Rev. 17:8). Or "O thou destroyer", as the Targum, which paraphrases it thus, "Gabriel, the prince of Zion, said to the Babylonish nation that spoileth or destroyeth." Which is true of literal Babylon, called the destroying mountain (Jer. 51:25). And of mystical Babylon, the destroyer both of the bodies and souls of men (Rev. 11:18).

“Destroyed” (compare Isa. 13:1 – 14:23, 46-47; Jer. chapters 50 and 51; Hab. 1:11; 2:6-17).

"Happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us": Meaning Darius the Mede, as Kimchi; or rather, or however who must be added, Cyrus the Persian, as R. Obadiah. Who were ordered by the Lord to retaliate her, and do as she had done to others (Jer. 50:15). And in so doing pronounced happy, being the Lord's shepherd, raised up in righteousness to perform his

pleasure (Isa. 44:28). And here wished success by the godly Jews. In like manner the Christian princes will reward mystical Babylon, and be the happy instruments of her ruin (Rev. 18:6).

This was a prophetic Scripture about the destruction of Babylon. Many times, cities are spoken of as a daughter, or as a woman. In Revelation, Babylon the great is spoken of in this manner. It is as if the psalmist is saying, you deserve what you get, because of what you have done to us.

Psalm 137:9 "Happy [shall he be], that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones."

That takes the infants from their mothers' breasts, or out of their arms, and dashes out their brains against a "rock", as the word signifies. Which, though it may seem a piece of cruelty, was but a just retaliation. The Babylonians having done the same to the Jewish children, and is foretold elsewhere should be done to theirs (Isa. 13:16). Nor is this desired from a spirit of revenge, but for the glory of divine justice, and that such a generation of cruel creatures might be rooted out of the earth (see Rev. 2:2). Some allegorically understand this of crushing and mortifying the first motions of sin in the heart; but such a sense seems to have no place here.

This very thing had taken place in the overthrow of Jerusalem. He is wishing for the same horrors that they committed against Jerusalem to come to them. This sounds very cruel, but these children of Israel have always believed in an eye for an eye.

Psalm 137 Questions

1. In verse 1, when did they weep?
2. What is this Psalm telling about?
3. What was the main thing they thought of, when they thought of their homeland?
4. Where had they hung their harps?
5. Their captives required of them, what?
6. If they sang these songs of the temple in captivity, what effect would it have on them?
7. What does verse 5 say, that is to be forgotten, if he forgets Jerusalem?
8. The Jewish people have always thought of _____ as their homeland.
9. What is meant by the tongue cleaving to the roof of the mouth?
10. What does the author compare losing your special place of worship to?
11. What did the people of Edom say, to do to Jerusalem?

12. What is the daughter, in verse 8?

13. What horrible thing, in verse 9, had taken place in Jerusalem before?