

“In Distress but not Despair”  
Psalm 137  
(Preached at Trinity, October 27, 2013)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

**Disclaimer:** These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. One word that can be used to describe life in this world is uncertainty. Our life is uncertain. Of course, from God’s perspective everything is certain and absolute. But from our perspective it is most uncertain. We make plans for tomorrow but death can come at any moment. We may enjoy good health today but that could change at any moment. At any time an unforeseen situation could wipe us out financially. Powerful nations can be brought down, even our own. The only thing that is certain in this world is suffering.
2. We recognize the uncertainty of life but find great comfort in Christ who rules all things with perfect wisdom. There are no uncertainties with Him. Although we can experience terrible times of adversity our hope is certain.  
Paul described it:  
**2 Corinthians 4:8-10 NAS** - "*we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; <sup>9</sup> persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; <sup>10</sup> always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.*"
3. As we come to **Psalm 137** we have no indication as to the author but there is little doubt as to the situation.
  - A. The Psalmist describes sitting by the rivers of Babylon weeping. It describes the sorrow of Israel under the Babylonian exile. They had been forced from their homes, the city of Jerusalem burned, its walls torn down, and the temple decimated. They were relocated to Babylon.
  - B. This psalm is filled with pain and sorrow.  
"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept"
  - C. But while there is weeping we find the steadfast heart of a child of God.
4. I’ll divide the psalm into three divisions:
  - I. The sorrow of those in distress – **Verses 1-3**
  - II. Faithfulness to the kingdom of God – **Verses 4-6**
  - III. A prayer for God’s judgment upon His enemies – **Verses 7-9**
  - I. The sorrow of those in distress – **Verses 1-4**
    - A. The psalmist records weeping by the river – **Verse 1**
      1. You can feel the intensity of their sorrow as they remembered Jerusalem – their memories produced deep-felt grief that brought rivers of tears.
      2. The “river” describes the series of canals that ran through Babylon. They served as a vivid comparison to the endless flow of their tears. They also painted a vivid contrast to the hills and valleys of Judah and the flat region of Babylon. It was a continual reminder that they were not home
      3. They had suffered great loss and great adversity.
    - B. They refused to play the songs of Zion
      1. Among the captives were skilled musicians. Their captors often demanded that they play for them – **Verse 3**
      2. In defiance they refused. They hung their harps on the trees – **Verse 2**
      3. They could not; they would not sing the songs of Zion in this wicked land.

- C. What a picture of our earthly condition
1. Does it not fill our hearts with sorrow as we live in this world?  
When we face adversity does it not cause us to look beyond this world?
  2. When we observe this world of wickedness do we not at times sit down and weep?
  3. Is it possible for us to fully enter into the joys of this world?  
God has granted us glorious things to treasure and enjoy – but this world is not our home. It can never be made heaven. This world will always be characterized by rivers of tears.

## II. Faithfulness to the kingdom of God – **Verses 5-6**

- A. Israel never forgot Jerusalem
1. There were children born in Babylon who never knew Jerusalem. They never saw the marble walls of the city. They never saw the magnificent temple.
  2. The elders, however, remembered it well. They thought of it continually. And they continually spoke of it to the children.
  3. They would not forget the splendors of the City of God  
**Psalm 137:6 KJV** - " If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth"
  4. Babylon had many riches and marvels to behold. The people of Babylon had many things to enjoy and cause them rejoice – but the faithful of Israel refused to partake
- B. This speaks volumes to us today
1. What is the source of our greatest joy?
  2. This world has many things that bring joy to the human heart.  
We can partake of many of them.
    - a. We can enjoy times of celebration. Jesus joined in the festivities of a wedding feast.  
**John 2:1-3 KJV** – “And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there: <sup>2</sup> And both Jesus was called, and his disciples, to the marriage. <sup>3</sup> And when they wanted wine, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine.”
    - b. We can enjoy the wonders of God’s creation. Vacations can be wonderful times of reflecting upon God’s glory in the works of His hands.
    - c. We can enjoy the material blessings God bestows upon us. It is good to have a nice home, nice car, nice clothes.
  3. But none of these things fill our heart with the greatest joy.
    - a. What place does Christ have in your life? Does the Gospel fill your heart with wonder and amazement?  
Newton wrote: “*Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. . .*”- He referred to the Gospel of grace as “sweet” & “amazing”
    - b. What place does worship have in your life? Does the thought of entering into the house of God fill your heart with joy?  
Listen to the psalmist:  
**Psalm 100:1-4 KJV** - "Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all ye lands. <sup>2</sup> Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing. <sup>3</sup> Know ye that the LORD he *is* God: *it is* he *that* hath made us, and not we ourselves; *we are* his people, and the sheep of his pasture. <sup>4</sup> Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, *and* into his courts with praise: be thankful unto him, *and* bless his name."

- c. What place does God's Word have in your life? Does it fill your heart with joy?  
**Psalms 119:162 KJV** - "I rejoice at thy word, as one that findeth great spoil."  
The word for "rejoice" speaks of the display of joy. In other words the Word of God filled David's heart with joy.
- d. What would be your heart if it was all taken away

### III. A prayer for God's judgment upon His enemies – **Verses 7-9**

- A. The psalm closes with the familiar imprecation seen often in the psalms
  - 1. The psalmist begins, **v.7** "Remember, O LORD"
    - a. The CSV puts it in plain language  
**Psalms 137:7** - "Remember, LORD, what the Edomites said that day at Jerusalem: "Destroy it! Destroy it down to its foundations!"
    - b. The call is upon God to remember those who cursed Zion
  - 2. Then he expresses a desire for God's curse to be upon Zion's enemies
    - a. **Psalms 137:8 KJV** - "O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy *shall he be*, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us."  
The prayer was for Babylon to be rewarded in the same manner in which they treated Jerusalem
    - b. The destroyer shall be performing a just action, a fulfilling work.  
Happy shall he be.
    - c. They shall receive brutality for brutality  
They were most brutal with Jerusalem showing no mercy  
**Jeremiah 52:10-11 KJV** - "And the king of Babylon slew the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes: he slew also all the princes of Judah in Riblah. <sup>11</sup> Then he put out the eyes of Zedekiah; and the king of Babylon bound him in chains, and carried him to Babylon, and put him in prison till the day of his death."
    - d. The wording of **Verse 9** seems harsh to us  
**Psalms 137:9 KJV** - "Happy *shall he be*, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones."
- B. The nature of the imprecatory psalms
  - 1. In all there are 104 imprecatory verses in the psalms.  
Of the imprecatory psalms, Psalm 7 is the mildest and Psalm 109 is the strongest. Other imprecatory psalms include Psalms 35, 58, 59, 69, 139, and of course this one.
  - 2. These are prayers calling for the punishment of the wicked.  
As we read these psalms they often seem harsh to us, particularly in the light of the NT instruction for us to love our enemies.  
**Psalms 58:6** - "Break their teeth, O God, in their mouth: break out the great teeth of the young lions, O LORD."  
**Psalms 109:8-10** – "Let his days be few; *and* let another take his office. <sup>9</sup> Let his children be fatherless, and his wife a widow. <sup>10</sup> Let his children be continually vagabonds, and beg: let them seek *their bread* also out of their desolate places."  
**Psalms 139:19-22** – "O that Thou wouldst slay the wicked, O God; Depart from me, therefore, men of bloodshed. <sup>20</sup> For they speak against You wickedly, And Your enemies take *Your name* in vain. <sup>21</sup> Do I not hate those who hate You, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against You? <sup>22</sup> I hate them with the utmost hatred; They have become my enemies."

3. We must not forget, however, that this is Scripture. Jesus was not afraid to quote from the imprecatory Psalms (He quoted Psalm 69). We must not despise them.
  4. We must always have a holy hatred of sin. There is a difference between moral repugnance and personal vengeance.
    - a. We can have a holy hatred of the sinner while at the same time be filled with pity and a desire for his salvation.
    - b. We can be angry over sin without being sinful in anger  
**Ephesians 4:26-27** – “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: <sup>27</sup> Neither give place to the devil.”
    - c. While we should pray for our enemies this doesn’t mean we cease to pray for justice.
  5. There may come a time in the wickedness of the sinner where wickedness is so persistent and God despising that judgment is all that remains.  
**Matthew 10:14-15** – “And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. <sup>15</sup> Verily I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrha in the day of judgment, than for that city.”
  6. The modern church has often been too lax on sin.  
James Montgomery Boice – “We err on the side, not of being too harsh with those who practice evil, but of being too lax. We treat both virtue and vice lightly, forgetting that virtue should be rewarded and that evil should be punished. So we are not so much more moral than these ancient Jews as amoral. At least they were concerned about justice; we are not.”
  7. While we leave vengeance in the hand of God we can also pray for vindication.  
Spurgeon (*Treasury*) - we have utterances of burning indignation against the chief adversaries of Israel, —an indignation as righteous as it was fervent. Let those find fault with it who have never seen their temple burned, their city ruined, their wives ravished, and after children slain; they might not, perhaps, be quite so velvet mouthed if they had suffered after this fashion. It is one thing to talk of the bitter feeling which moved captive Israelites in Babylon, and quite another thing to be captives ourselves under a savage and remorseless power, which knew not how to show mercy, but delighted in barbarities to the defenseless.”
- C. Ultimately, Israel’s enemies were enemies of Zion
1. This finds its greatest meaning today
  2. The enemies of the Gospel are the enemies of the cross.  
**Philippians 3:18-19 KJV** - "For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, *that they are* the enemies of the cross of Christ: <sup>19</sup> Whose end *is* destruction, whose God *is* their belly, and *whose* glory *is* in their shame, who mind earthly things."
  3. They are enemies of Christ. He conquered all of His enemies at the cross.  
**Hebrews 10:12-13 KJV** - "But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; <sup>13</sup> From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool."

#### Conclusion:

1. This psalm speaks greatly to us
2. We must live in this world recognizing that it is not our home. We are strangers in this land. Their ways are not our ways. Their words are not our words. Their thoughts are not our thoughts. We must long for our homeland.  
**Psalm 137:1 KJV** - "yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion."
3. Their joys are not our joys. We must not become enamored by the gods of this world.  
**Psalm 137:4 KJV** - "How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?"

4. We must desire that all wickedness be destroyed. We are to pray that Christ will reign supreme and that all of His enemies be crushed beneath His feet.
5. We are a people of a different sort.  
**2 Corinthians 6:17 KJV** - "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*"  
**Ephesians 5:8 KJV** - "For ye were sometimes darkness, but now *are ye* light in the Lord: walk as children of light:"  
**Colossians 3:1-2 KJV** - "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. <sup>2</sup> Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth."