

Psalm 137 “Singing in a Foreign Land”
Psalm 137
Luke 1:1-25

December 2, 2018

Those last two lines are too much for some people:

“Blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us!
Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!”

How can the Psalmist promise *blessing* to the one who dashes little children against the rock?

It sounds blood thirsty!
It sounds like revenge!

But it’s not just the Psalmist—

because if this is the Word of God, then *God* is promising blessing to the one
who dashes Babylonian children against the rock!

What is Psalm 137 doing?

We see over and over throughout the scriptures
that God’s justice is a sort of poetic justice.

Think of the Golden Rule:

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Or think of how Jesus says,

“With the same measure that you judge others, you will be judged.”

Psalm 137 is simply expressing that principle!

When Babylon invaded Judah
this is what they had done to the people of Jerusalem.

If you smash children’s heads against a rock –
then don’t be surprised if God sends a judgment that fits the crime!

We often see abortion as one of the great evils in our land for which we *deserve* the wrath of God
(which is true),

but how often do we see abortion as *itself* a judgment *from* God?

What is abortion, after all, but “dashing little ones against the rock”?

Yes, I know that even Christians—in a moment of fear or lapse of faith—
have had abortions.

Maybe you did.

And there is forgiveness!

God will forgive all who repent and come to him in faith!

But abortion is simply dashing your little one against the rock.

Did that child deserve to die?

If it is a child of Babylon,
then the horrible answer is yes!

Now let me make this clear:
that child does not deserve to die any more (or less) than the parent:
because the wages of sin is death.

In Adam, all humanity is under God's wrath and curse.

In Adam, we all deserve death.

Including children.

When God brought judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah –
everyone was destroyed – men, women, and children.

When God brought judgment upon the Canaanites through the Conquest –
everyone was to be destroyed – men, women, and children.

At the Exodus – it was the *firstborn* – it was *children* who perished
(why? Because the Egyptians had been slaughtering Hebrew babies.
And the punishment *fits* the crime).

But that does not make the punishment an inherently good thing!

In the same way, the fact that abortion may well be a national judgment
does not make abortion a good thing!

Let me give you an example:

did Jerusalem deserve destruction at the hands of Babylon?

Yes! The people of God had rebelled against God,
and so the destruction of Jerusalem was exactly what they deserved
(the city of God had, in effect, become the city of man.
Isaiah even compares Jerusalem with Babylon!)

So then Babylon was simply the instrument of God
in bringing his judgment against Jerusalem.

So, then is Babylon innocent?

By no means!

God used the wicked to bring judgment against the wicked.

Even so,

abortion is wicked.

And by means of abortion, God brings judgment against the wicked.

He cuts off the seed of the wicked,
and through abortion the wicked have fewer and fewer children.

Sing Psalm 137
Read Luke 1:1-25

In the same way that God's wrath and curse affects children –
so also his blessing and his mercy affects children!

Here in Luke 1, we see Zechariah praying in the temple.

What was Zechariah praying for?

When we hear the angel say “your prayer has been heard,
and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son...”
we often assume that he had been praying for a child.

But were already told in v7 that both Zechariah and Elizabeth were “advanced in years.”
And we are told in verse 10 that there was a whole multitude of people praying outside
at the hour of incense.

What was Zechariah praying for?

If he was a righteous and faithful priest –
then at the hour of incense he would be offering up prayers
for the coming of the Messiah – the Son of David –
he would be praying for the coming of the Kingdom of God!

I don't doubt that he had prayed for a child for many years!
But it may have been years since he had last prayed for a child!

But through the coming of *his* child,
the blessing of the LORD will begin to come to Israel –
as John will prepared the way of the LORD.

Advent is the ultimate answer to the question of Psalm 137.

The central question of Psalm 137 is

“How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?”

The problem of Psalm 137 is the problem of exile –
the problem that we *don't* belong here.

We are citizens of Zion – the heavenly Jerusalem –
and so as one 2nd century Christian writer put it,
every homeland is a foreign land.

And yet, as the same writer put it,
for the Christian every foreign land is a homeland.

There is no nation on earth that can claim our ultimate allegiance;
and yet wherever we go, we find friends, brothers, sisters, the family of Jesus.

But even so, we need to ask with the Psalmist:
“how shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land.

And this is a question that we all ask.

More than a decade ago I was listening to a discussion on Moody Radio
where an author was pointing out that most contemporary worship
is focused on being happy.

And he was concerned that such worship cannot connect with those who are suffering.
He asked, where are the laments in our worship?

And pointed out that Israel’s hymnal—the Psalms—contained many laments.
But when the host asked him, “so what do we do about this?”
he didn’t have much to say about worship.

He said that we should work harder at being a place
where people can deal openly with suffering—and he was right on target on that.
But if I had had a cell phone I would have called in and said,
“how about singing the Psalms!”

Because we *are* exiles.

Peter tells us that we are elect exiles—
those whom God has called and chosen to endure through suffering.

You are suffering.

Maybe your marriage is rocky.
Maybe your colleagues at work are difficult.
Maybe you feel alone and afraid.

And for whatever reason, you don’t feel like “being happy.”

You don’t want to try to put a smiley face on your sorrow!
“How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?”
How can I rejoice in what God has done,
when what God has done is bring suffering into my life?

When you think about *what should be*,
and you look around at *what is*,
that’s depressing!

Lord, if Jesus has triumphed over sin and death,
then how come I keep sinning?

Lord, if your church is supposed to be my family, why do I feel alone?

There is a place for lament.

There is a place for pouring out your heart before God and saying,
My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why aren’t things the way they should be?

And that place is here—
not just here, as in this building—
but here, as in these people.

Psalm 137 teaches us how to weep.

1. Singing in a Time of Exile and Suffering (1-3)

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept.

WE.

The exiles together.

“Mourn with those who mourn.”

The road to comfort does not start with trying get someone to “cheer up.”

The road to comfort starts with joining them in their grief and sorrow.

We see in the book of Job how Job’s three friends do *one thing right!*

It’s not what they *say*.

It’s what they *do*.

They sit in silence for *seven days*.

Once they start talking, they mess everything up!

Sometimes there is *nothing to say*.

When someone says “I’m suffering”--

you don’t have to rush to cheer them up—

rather, listen to them, and join them in their lament.

Because after all, we are all in Babylon...

What is Babylon?

Babylon starts in scripture as the historical city that was the center of an empire.

For centuries Babylon ruled the region known today as southern Iraq,

but the Babylonian empire waned and came under the sway of Assyria,
its neighbor to the north.

The Assyrian empire dominated the known world for 250 years,

but Babylon rebelled and finally overthrew Assyria in 626 BC.

For nearly a century the renewed Babylonian empire wreaked havoc in the middle east,
with Jerusalem falling before the armies of Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BC.

Babylon was the instrument that God used to bring judgment against his people.

God had warned Israel that if they rebelled, he would send them into exile.

And after their continued rebellion over 500 years, he finally did as he had warned:

he sent Nebuchadnezzar to take Israel captive.

Babylon invaded Judah,

destroyed all the cities of Judah—including Jerusalem—
slaughtered men, women, and children,
and destroyed the temple.

Nebuchadnezzar took captive the leaders and nobles and
exiled tens of thousands of people to Babylon.

Babylon is frequently set over against Jerusalem as the city of man and the city of God.
Throughout the prophets “Babylon” is seen as symbolic
of all that is wrong with humanity—
and therefore, it is a city that is itself under judgment:

God says in Isaiah 13:17-20 that he is stirring up the Medes against Babylon,
“And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the splendor and pomp of the Chaldeans,
will be like Sodom and Gomorrah when God overthrew them
It will never be inhabited or lived in for all generations;
no Arab will pitch his tent there;
no shepherds will make their flocks lie down there”
And as Isaiah said, so it happened.
Babylon was overthrown,
by 300 BC it was a minor outpost,
and by 100 AD it was desolate.
And for nearly 2000 years Babylon has remained a waste.

The city of man that dared to cast down the city of God
has been struck with God’s curse.

Like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Later in Isaiah 47, the prophet declares that Babylon will be destroyed:
“These two things shall come to you in a moment, in one day;
the loss of children and widowhood shall come upon you in full measure,
in spite of your many sorceries and the great power of your enchantments.”
Babylon was the greatest city of the ancient world.
Its power, its wealth, and its splendor was second to none.
But Isaiah says that in the warfare between the two cities,
in the end, Babylon will fall, and Jerusalem (Zion) will triumph.

It is this image of Babylon that is taken up in Revelation.
Babylon as the great harlot—the city that lures in the merchants and kings of the earth—
the city that economically and militarily dominates the world.
In the first century, that city was Rome.
But many others could well fit the bill throughout history.
But the apostles taught us that we are citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem.

We are exiles who live in the midst of “Babylon,”
but we are children of Zion who live out the time of our exile here,
enduring suffering for the sake of Christ.
We live as pilgrims whose eyes are set on the city of God,
even as we live in the city of man.

But how do we sing the LORD’s song in this foreign land?
When our captors require of us mirth—
when they mock us, saying, “now sing us one of your songs of Zion!”
Your God could not protect you!
Your God did not deliver you!
He gave you up into our hands!

When unbelievers mock—or simply ignore you...

2. Remembering Zion from a Foreign Land (4-6)

How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?
How do we sing songs of praise to God when we are in exile?

We don’t.
At least, not at first.
There is no expression of praise in Psalm 137.
If Psalm 22—“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” — is a Psalm of the cross,
then so is Psalm 137.
Jesus is the singer of Psalm 137—exiled away from the heavenly city.
In the midst of exile, of death, of separation from God’s grace and favor,
remember Jerusalem.

Remember Zion.
*If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill.
May I never play my harp again if I forget you!
Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!*

When you are in the midst of suffering.
When you are grieving over sin.
When you are enduring the cross,
sharing, as Paul says, in the sufferings of Christ,
that is when you remember Jerusalem.

But for Jesus, where is Babylon?

In Jesus's day, Jerusalem was now the city that was arrayed against the Holy One!
Jerusalem had become Babylon.

For Jesus, the heavenly Jerusalem was the true city – the true home.
The earthly Jerusalem – for Jesus – had become Babylon – the city of man.

But Jesus, for the joy set before, endured the cross, scorning its shame.
Therefore you, too, must remember the heavenly Jerusalem.
When you feel Babylon's foul, yet seductive breath on the back of your neck,
Remember Zion.

Because the danger is that you will forget.
The danger is that your suffering will cause you to turn away.
This is the central theme of verses 4-6.
We wept when we first came to Babylon,
but now we are in danger of forgetting the songs of Zion.
We are in danger of forgetting Jerusalem.

Babylon isn't so bad...

We can live here and still be faithful to God,
so let's enjoy it!

That is the tendency for us, isn't it?
I'll be a Christian on Sundays, Wednesday evenings, and before every meal!
But at work? Nah!

The day would come when the decree went out that the Israelites could return to Jerusalem.

42,360 returned.

We don't know how many stayed in Exile—but it was many times more than that!

Many forgot Jerusalem.
They no longer sang the songs of Zion.

How do you remember Jerusalem?
Make it your chief joy.

When you are enduring trial and tribulation,
remember the joy that awaits you.
Remember that God has promised a glorious restoration!

And remember that God will make everything right in the end!
Because he has made it right in Jesus.
Jesus has entered the heavenly Jerusalem.
And since we have been united with Christ,
we too have come before the living God!

3. LORD, Remember the Day of Jerusalem (When Will You Make Things *Right?*) (7-9)

How do we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?
By asking God to remember his promises.
Remember, LORD, what you have said!

And remember, Lord, what your enemies have said and done!
Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem.
Edom had joined with Babylon in bringing down the walls of Jerusalem.
Edom had celebrated the destruction of the city of God.
Remember that against them, O Lord!
O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed—
the Psalmist is aware of Isaiah's prophecy!
blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us!
Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

Jerusalem had been destroyed because Judah had rebelled against God.
These were the promised curses of Deuteronomy 27-28.
If Israel refused to follow the LORD, but walked in their own sinful ways,
then God would bring a nation against them to destroy them,
and send them into exile.
And when God's judgment comes against a nation,
the whole nation suffers—
most poignantly, the children.

You see this in every war.
Every war—even the most just—creates thousands (if not millions) of orphans.
Even when you try to avoid civilian casualties, there are children who wind up dead—
and in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, there were no international protections for children.
When you lay siege to a city, the first to die of starvation are the children.
Jeremiah speaks of mothers eating their children out of desperation.

Killing children was often used as a way to reduce the power of a nation—
after all, if you kill their children, you ensure that they will have no future.
Pharaoh did this to the Israelites in Egypt.

But how can God declare this blessed?
Consider the Flood.

When the peoples grew so wicked as to call down heavenly judgment,
God destroyed all of humanity—except for 8.
In the waters of the flood God destroyed men, women, and children.
Consider Sodom and Gomorrah.
When God brought fire from heaven to destroy these wicked cities,
he guaranteed that they would have no future—
by killing their children as well.
And remember that Isaiah compared Babylon to Sodom and Gomorrah!
And for that matter, consider Egypt!
Pharaoh had tried to kill the sons of Israel—
but instead God killed all the firstborn of Egypt.
The tenth and final plague was the death of every firstborn in all Egypt—
all except for those who were protected by the blood of the lamb.

The Flood, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the death of the firstborn in Egypt
were pictures of the final judgment.
When God’s judgment falls, it falls upon all.

You see this also in the conquest of the land by Joshua.
When God brought that picture of the final judgment,
he commanded Israel to kill men, women, and children.

I know this is hard.
We don’t like to think of children deserving God’s judgment.
We like to think that they are innocent.

But God says that there is *none* righteous—not even one!

And so he declares that Babylon will receive its own taste of the final judgment.

And as is often the case,
that judgment will take the very form of what they did to others.

So when Psalm 137:9 says “blessed shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock,”
it is saying that God will judge Babylon
the same way he will judge all those who do evil:
He will bring their own sin upon their heads.

You see, God is just.
In the end, he will right every wrong.
He will make sure that those who broke his law are brought to justice.

Maybe you have been wronged—
maybe even as a child—
rest assured that God will bring justice in the end!

Conclusion: The Blessed One

But finally, what do we do with this *blessing* that is proclaimed
to the one who dashes these little ones against the rock?

No, Psalm 137 is not endorsing terrorism!

This is not a call for Israelites to go around killing Babylonian babies.
The promised blessing is for the *one* who repays Babylon.

Is this a blessing for Cyrus—the Persian king who overthrew Babylon?

Isaiah 45:1 calls Cyrus, “my anointed,”

and says that “I call you by your name, I name you, though you do not know me.”

Perhaps there is some sense of this,

but Psalm 137, like Isaiah, is not focused merely on the immediate Babylon.

They see the city of man and the City of God—

and therefore Psalm 137 speaks of Jesus.

Jesus is the blessed one who brings destruction to the enemies of God.

He is the righteous judge who will make everything right.

We are often uncomfortable these days with asking God to bring justice.

And that is understandable.

We have too often seen self-righteous preachers declaring their own standard of justice.

But remember the martyrs under the throne in Revelation 6:10,

as they cry out, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge
and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

And remember the promise of Revelation 18 that Babylon *will* be overthrown.

The city of man will not triumph!

God’s judgment is coming.

Jesus is the righteous judge—the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

He will right every wrong.

He will cut off the wicked and their line will cease forever.

How do we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?

With confidence—remembering our true homeland—

because we know that Jesus will remember us!