

Your Worship in an Alien World

From the Psalms

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Bible Text: Psalm 137:1-8

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If you have been on a long trip and, perhaps, been away from home for a month or several months you have, no doubt, experienced some home sickness. And if in God's providence you have not been on a trip, but lost your home as a result of a fire or a flood or an earthquake or, perhaps, because you have been involved in the tragedy of war, there is nothing homesickness, but there is deep sorrow and grief because of the separation from home and because of the tragedy which has befallen you.

How do you sing the Lord's song? How do you sing the praises of God in such circumstances? This is the question that the psalmist is asking.

In the midst of the tragedy in which Israel finds itself, having been driven from its homeland and is in captivity in Babylon. How do you sing the Lord's song in such circumstances?

Well, the psalm teaches us that the way you are able to sing the Lord's song in such circumstances is that you remember your homeland. And for the Christian the homeland is heaven. And, on the other hand, you also remember the judgments of God. And, of course, the Israelites were interested in that judgment. We ought to be interested in that judgment, too.

And so you, as God's people, can sing the Lord's song remembering your homeland and remembering God's judgments.

And this is the point that I want you to get this morning. As you are a people who live in a world, in a hostile world in many ways, you, too, can sing the Lord's song remembering your homeland and remembering God's judgments.

As we look at Psalm 137 this morning and the first three verses we see immediately that the people are in deep trouble in Babylon.

Verses one through three in Psalm 137.

By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down and wept, When we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst of it We hung our harps. For there our captors demanded of us songs, And our tormentors mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."¹

Here the people, driven from Jerusalem, driven from Judea, are now in Babylon. And as the text says, they sat. They did not stand. But they sat. They were throwing themselves on the ground in despair, weeping as the text says. "There we sat down and wept."²

And you get the understanding of this when you think about people who have lost their homes, those in California, perhaps, who, because of the wildfires have lost their homes or here in Pittsburgh who have been subject to a fire, an apartment fire and there is nothing left. And the people weep because there is nothing left. There is nothing to go back to.

And so it was with the people of Israel. "When we remembered Zion,"³ and the destruction of the city, how the city has been left in rubble and not one stone has been left upon another in that temple which was that glorious house of worship. And so the people in Babylon, as verse two tells us, hung their harps upon the willows.

These are probably the Levitical harps, the harps that were used for the worship of God in the temple. But they are of no use now because the temple is gone and those harps were especially designed by David to be utilized in the singing of the psalms, in the worship of God when the sacrifices were taking place in that temple. And the temple now is gone. It is destroyed. And the people have been removed from its presence and are sitting by the waters of the Euphrates in Babylon.

And there were many interconnected canals crisscrossing the valley and there was lush foliage along those canals and along those rivers.

The translations we have give "the willow." It is very possible that small willow trees were growing. Other translations call it the poplar tree.

When the Hebrews translated the Old Testament into Greek they specifically mentioned willow trees here and you can think of the weeping willow, the branches drooping low, bending over the waters. And they hung their harps because the worship of God had been cut off.

"For there our captors demanded of us songs, And our tormentors mirth, saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'"⁴

¹ Psalm 137:1-3.

² Psalm 137:1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Psalm 137:3.

And you can imagine the scene. The Babylonians scoffing at the Israelites. “Where is your God?”

You remember Elijah on Mount Carmel mocking Baal. “Where is he? Has he turned aside? Has he gone to the bathroom?”⁵

And so the Babylonians were mocking the true God, the God of the Israelites. “Go ahead, sing us a song.”

And, of course, the question then would arise—as we have it in verse four, “How can we sing the LORD’S song In a foreign land?”⁶ among these captors, among these tormentors. “How can we sing the LORD’S song?”⁷

The Lord’s song, as you see in verse four, is the song of Zion, the song that was sung in the homeland, the song that was sung in the temple of God, the song that was sung by the Levites as the sacrifices were being performed. And not separated in a foreign land, how can we sing those songs?

The song of the Lord, too, was the song that the Lord himself had given to the people as recorded in the Psalter. And they sang those songs in their worship. “How can we sing the LORD’S song In a foreign land?”⁸ verse four asks.

They were in a foreign land. They were aliens and strangers in Babylon. They didn’t like it there and they longed to go back to Judea. They longed to go back to Jerusalem. They longed for the temple and the worship of God in that place.

You, too, are aliens. You realize this, do you not? You, too, are aliens in a foreign land. You are citizens of heaven the apostle Paul tells you and your homeland is heaven.⁹ And in those of us who are more elderly in our midst long to go to the homeland much more than the some of the rest of us do. And that’s a good thing. The Church is an embassy of heaven and an embassy is not just a building and the Church is not just a building. We understand that this is the case.

You look up the word “embassy” in the dictionary. An embassy is a group of people sent by the chief dignitary of the homeland to another country. And your homeland is heaven and you are an embassy of heaven in this world, in this alien world. That is actually your status, you see. We know this from the New Testament.

And so the question asked in verse four pertains to you, does it not? “How can we sing the LORD’S song In a foreign land?”¹⁰ in a land where Christians are denigrated on a

⁵ See 1 Kings 18:27.

⁶ Psalm 137:4.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ See Philippians 3:20.

¹⁰ Psalm 137:4.

regular basis, in a land where prayer has been expunged from schools, in a land where the government has now said that if money is given to any public institution, the religious services must be banned from that institution.

I wonder how IntersVarsity, I wonder how other Christian organizations are going to conduct their Bible studies on the campuses of our local universities if this is really implemented.

We are aliens in a foreign land. How do you sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? You must remember your homeland. Look, again, at verses four, five and six in Psalm 137.

How can we sing the LORD'S song In a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, May my right hand forget her skill.¹¹

Or, may my right hand wither. That is... I am a left hander so I have to change hands. May that right hand whither so it can no longer pluck the harp. And then verse six says, "May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth If I do not remember you, If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy."¹²

"If I do not remember the glory of my homeland, how can I sing the Lord's song? If I don't remember, may my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth so that I am silenced," says the psalmist.

And is this not the case?

Now some of the commentators here say that it was true that the people would not sing the songs of Zion. They would not sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land. But I think the implication of the text is that they would sing the song given a property perspective, given that they would remember their homeland. And I say this is the case for a couple of reasons. One is that Jeremiah had already sent a letter to the captives in Babylon before the final fall of Jerusalem. Jeremiah sent a letter to the captives in Babylon and he said, "You are going to be there for a while, so you need to settle down. You need to build houses. You need to raise families. You need to grow gardens and you need to pray for the welfare of the cities in which you find yourselves."¹³ This is in Jeremiah 29.

You need to pray.

And when the people prayed, it was usually in public gatherings. It wasn't simply in their prayer closets. It was in public gatherings. And the reason this was the case is that Moses, centuries before, had already directed the people to gather on the sabbath day for a holy convocation. In fact, their gathering on the sabbath day was the first convocation recorded for their observance in the book of Leviticus. And the people were mandated to come together and the Levites were to teach them. This as their duty. The Levites were

¹¹ Psalm 137:4-5.

¹² Psalm 137:6.

¹³ See Jeremiah 29:4-7.

their teachers and so they were mandated to come together for teaching on the Lord's day. And so they would come together for teaching and for prayer. And this really is the root of the synagogue movement among Israel.

And so the practice would have already been ingrained in them to gather together for prayer and for study.

And so the question is asked. How can they sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Well, they are to get together on the sabbath day and remember their homeland and remember the promises of God. That is how they can sing the Lord's song in a foreign land.

And, you see, it is exactly the same way with you and me. How can you sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? You have to remember your homeland which is in heaven. And on a regular basis when we come together on the Lord's day, on the Christian sabbath, what do we do? We remember the work of Jesus Christ on our behalf and you remember what Jesus Christ has done for you and you remember the fact that you are not a citizen of this world, but your citizenship is really in heaven and Jesus Christ is taking you back there. And you can remember that. And because this is the case, in a foreign land where at work or in school or in whatever other circumstance you find yourself, you might be mocked and tormented, you can sing the Lord's song.

So that is one part of it. You can sing the Lord's song remembering your homeland.

But then comes the question of judgment. Look at our text again.

Verse seven. "Remember, O LORD, against the sons of Edom The day of Jerusalem, Who said, 'Raze it, raze it To its very foundation.'"¹⁴

The Edomites were the children of Esau and there was no small disagreement between Jacob and Esau which carried through the generations. And when the Edomites saw the Babylonians come into the territory and begin to strip Jerusalem bare they said, "Go for it, Babylonians." That was their posture. You see this plainly, "Who said, 'Raze it, raze it To its very foundation.'"¹⁵ They cheered on the Babylonians.

And then when the Babylonians left the Edomites when down into Jerusalem and looted the city. You can read about this in the prophet Obadiah, the little prophet Obadiah. They went down into the city and went into the houses and went into the market places and looted the city.

Do you remember the looting in Baghdad after American troops went into the city? And there was a lot of fear because of the looting that took place. And a lot of people thought there are going to be a lot of archaeological things lost because of the looting. And you also remember New Orleans after Katrina, the police leaving the city. And there it was. And the looters came in.

¹⁴ Psalm 137:7.

¹⁵ Ibid.

And there were pictures on the television of men and women carrying television sets out of stores and driving cars off of showroom floors, the looting that took place.

This is what took place, you see, in Jerusalem. And the prayer is, “Repay those Edomites their evil.” That is the prayer. And the prayer does not stop there.

Look at verse eight. “O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one, How blessed will be the one who repays you With the recompense with which you have repaid us.”¹⁶

The prayer is: Judge Babylon. The Babylonians were a vicious people and when you see atrocities committed, a revulsion rises in your own heart and what do you say? There needs to be a payment. There needs to be justice.

This is what is going through the minds of the parents of the men and women who were lost in the bombing of the USS Cole when the perpetrators have been released and they are saying, “Where is the justice?” It is not wrong to long for justice. God is a God of justice.

And then we have these awesome words at the end of the psalm. “How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones Against the rock.”¹⁷

This is God’s justice.

Do you remember when Israel went into the Promised Land what they were required to do? With regard to the Ammonites whose cup of sin was filled this is what the Bible says. “So we captured all his cities at that time and utterly destroyed the men, women and children of every city. We left no survivor.”¹⁸

Why? Because the cup of sin had been filled to the brim and the hand of God’s justice was coming against the Ammonites. And in this case it happened that Israel was the hand of God’s justice.

But then Israel sinned and Israel was punished. And the hand of God’s justice against Israel was Babylon. And before that the hand of God’s justice against Israel was Assyria and the northern kingdom was destroyed. God’s justice is heavy. You need to understand that and I need to understand that.

With regard to the Assyrians and their work the Bible says in Hosea, “Mothers were dashed in pieces with their children.”¹⁹ God’s justice.

¹⁶ Psalm 137:8.

¹⁷ Psalm 137:9.

¹⁸ Deuteronomy 2:34.

¹⁹ Hosea 10:14.

And when the Babylonians were used to judge the Assyrians and crippled Nineveh, the Bible says, “Yet she became an exile, She went into captivity; Also her small children were dashed to pieces.”²⁰

Why such judgment? Why such devastation? That posterity would no longer exist, that people would be wiped off the face of the earth? That was the idea.

It is harsh.

And in the Psalm, then, we read, “If the Babylonians act this way, blessed is the one who dashes your little ones against the rock. Let it be done to you as you have done to others. Let the recompense fall upon your head.”

When I think about this I shutter. And when I think about the Middle East in these days I shutter. Do you not? There is a vicious enemy in the world. And those leaders of Al Qaeda and those Muslim terrorists without compunction take men and women and children and lop off their heads. They are not playing games.

Oh, God of heaven, bring against them your judgment. Bring against them the judgments that they wield with the sword in their own hands. May they feel the smiting of your hand, oh God.

That ought to be our prayer. Let their little ones be dashed against a rock. It is a hard prayer. But, friends, it is a prayer that implores the judgment of God. And so when you remember the judgments of God I say to you and you remember the homeland that God is preparing for you, you are able to sing the songs of the Lord, the songs of Zion, the songs of God. And where do the judgments of God and the grace of God intersect in the most profound way? They intersect, friends, at the cross. That is where they intersect because the judgments of God have been placed upon Jesus Christ the Son, the judgments for your sins. You are the ones that ought to die because of sin. But because God in his justice put his wrath upon his own Son in your place and that judgment was real because God placed the judgment due to you on Jesus Christ. You have the hope of heaven. You have a homeland. You have peace and joy. And so you can sing the Lord’s song remembering God’s judgments and remembering your homeland.

This was the case with Israel in Babylon. How can I sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? By remembering my homeland and by remembering God’s judgments.

And when you come to this communion table this morning what are you celebrating? You are celebrating God’s work on your behalf that God’s judgment for your sin fell upon Jesus Christ and you have the hope of heaven. So sing the Lord’s song, friends. Sing the Lord’s song with a full heart remembering your homeland and remembering God’s judgments.

Let’s pray together.

²⁰ Nahum 3:10.

Father, we are grateful for your grace. How good you are. Bless us we pray with a better understanding of your Word. Bless us that we might, yes, sing your song, a song that you put on our hearts because we do remember our homeland in heaven purchased through Jesus Christ and we remember your judgments and how we have been spared from the penalty of death, the penalty of those judgments because of Christ. Bless us we pray. Fill us with grace and hope and cause us to sing your song we ask in the good name of Jesus Christ who is the Lord. Amen.