

Summer Psalms

*¹ Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
² but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.
(Psalms 1:1–2 ESV)*

*Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name;
worship the LORD in the splendor of holiness.
(Psalms 29:2 ESV)*

How Shall We Sing The Lord's Song In A Foreign Land?

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Psalm 137

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Psalm 137; that's on page 521 in your pew Bibles. This is perhaps the hardest and the darkest of all the Psalms. It's the one you probably wish wasn't in the Bible. I told you when we started this series that part of our goal in doing this was to help you understand these Psalms and to own them and to love them and to sing them and so we are not going to skip the hard ones – we're going to go right at them and none are harder than this.

Because of the nature of this Psalm, my plan this morning will be to read through it very slowly and to pause frequently in order to make sure that we have understood what this is Psalm is saying and what it isn't saying. Having done that we will seek to organize the intended teaching and then respond to it, by God's grace, as we should. Hear now the Word of the Lord.

¹ By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. ² On the willows there we hung up our lyres.

The background for this Psalm is the exile and deportation to Babylon in 586 BC. In that war Jerusalem was destroyed, the temple was burned, atrocities were committed and in the aftermath many of the Jewish nobles and craftsmen were stripped naked and made to walk as slaves back to Babylon. We know that many of the Jews were settled into cities by the Rivers of Babylon.

Ezekiel speaks about living by the Chebar River, Daniel mentions the Ulai River. So the picture here is of a line of captives who have hung up their lyres – their harps or their guitars as it were – on the far side of the River – the Jerusalem side of the River – before crossing over and settling down as captives in a foreign land. This is a picture of sorrow and mourning and dejection.

We pick up the story in verse 3:

³ For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”
⁴ How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?

Now this Psalm was probably written by a Levite - Ezekiel for example, who lived by the River, was from the tribe of Levi. The Levites led worship in the temple. But here they are not being asked to lead worship, they are being asked to sing and dance for the amusement of their captors. This is base cruelty. To ask someone to sing a song of joy in this situation is mockery and inhumanity – and they want none of it, so they hang their harps on the far side of the river. Look at verse 5:

⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!⁶ 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!

So here the hung instruments have become a focal point for the hope of restoration. You can easily picture this scene in your mind’s eye. A Levite living in his village beside the River comes down to the water in the morning. He looks across and he sees the trees where the harps and the lyres are hanging and he is reminded of his situation and he is reminded of how he got there. He is reminded of the high price of national apostasy. But he is also reminded of the faithfulness of the Lord. He will not always punish, his anger is but for a moment but his favour lasts a lifetime. We will go home, across the River. We will go home to Zion. We will sing again in the Presence of the Lord. When the work of chastisement is done, when our hearts have been humbled and our waywardness curbed – he will bring us home to Zion and we will sing. I will not forget to hope for that day, says the Psalmist.

Verse 7:

⁷ Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, “Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!”

In Hebrew to “remember against” means to remember so as to recompense. This is the Psalmist

asking God to remember what the Edomites did to Jerusalem and to give them justice. When Babylon destroyed Jerusalem they were aided, the Bible says, by the Edomites. The Edomites seeking to curry favour with the regional super-power turned on Israel and colluded with the enemy. They even rejoiced over Jerusalem's downfall believing it would contribute to their greater security and prosperity. To be betrayed by a relative – the Edomites were related to the Israelites - is a particular hardship and the Psalmist prays for God to see and to remember and to recompense.

Verse 8:

⁸ O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! ⁹ Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! (Psalms 137:1–9 ESV)

That verse is probably the hardest verse in the Bible to read – for a variety of reasons. First of all it reminds us that this actually happened to the Jewish people when Jerusalem was destroyed. This was fairly common practice in the ancient world – at least for the armies of Assyria and Babylon. They were known to do this as both a terror tactic and as a precaution against future uprising. When they defeated a city the soldiers would go through it and they would rape the women, pillage the treasure and murder the children. The news of this was intended to go through the region and to serve as a warning against any who would even think of standing in their way.

That's what happened to these people and our modern minds recoil from even the mention of such things. Our grandparents who fought in WW2 and who lived through the Holocaust can probably relate to this verse a little better than we can. They know what manner of brutality human beings are capable of but we try very hard to forget so we don't like to read this verse.

We also don't like to read this verse because it sounds like the Psalmist is vindictive and blood thirsty and vengeful in a way that does not seem to align with Christian teaching. Jesus said:

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44 ESV)

So how does Psalm 137:8 go with that? It doesn't seem to but we need to be careful to react to what is there and not what is not there. Notice for example that the Psalmist doesn't say:

“How happy I will be when I smash some Babylonian babies against the wall!”

He doesn't say that – he isn't planning to personally avenge himself on the Babylonians. Notice also that he doesn't say:

“What a wonderful thing it is to kill the babies of evil people!”

He doesn't say that either. He says: “Blessed is HE who repays you. Who does to you what you did to us”. Now grammatically that could mean two things. It could refer to the future king of the Persians who actually did destroy Babylon. This could be a way of saying that the person who executes the Lord's justice on Babylon will do so under the blessing and with the help of God. Now, that did happen. In the 5th year of Darius the Babylonians revolted against the Medo-Persians and Darius laid siege to Babylon before destroying it. He did to Babylon, in other words, exactly what Babylon did to Jerusalem and it was brutal. The historian Humphrey Prideaux describes it this way. He says:

As soon as the Babylonians saw themselves be girt by such an army as they could not cope with in the field, they turned their thoughts wholly to the supporting of themselves in the siege; in order whereto they took a resolution, the most desperate and barbarous that ever any nation practised. For to make their provisions last the longer, they agreed to cut off all unnecessary mouths among them, and therefore drawing together all the women and children, they strangled them all, whether wives, sisters, daughters, or young children useless for the wars – Humphrey Prideaux¹

The Babylonians were eventually forced by Darius to do to their own children what they had done to the children of Jerusalem. So Psalm 137 could mean that Darius was helped by God to execute this particular justice.

It could equally mean that this act of justice was “exactly proportionate”. The word translated by the ESV as “blessed” can also be translated as “straight” or “right”. Some scholars feel that would be the better translation of this verse. J. Alec Motyer for example translates it this way:

“How **right** he will be who seizes and shatters your children against a rock!”²

¹ Cited in numerous commentaries, as for example: <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/treasury-of-david/psalms-137-8.html>

² J. Alec Motyer, *Psalms By The Day* (Geanies House: Christian Focus, 2016), 396.

If that is the correct translation then the Psalmist is predicting that God execute perfect and equivalent justice. This verse then expresses the hope of future judgment.

Now, that's what Psalm 137 says – it is, as I said, the darkest and most tragic of all the Psalms. This Psalm evokes such powerful feelings in us that it often short circuits our understanding of it. There is a message in this Psalm and I want to make sure that we see it. I want to ask and by God's grace answer the question:

What Does This Psalm Intend To Teach Us?

First of all I think it means to teach us:

1. The horrible price of apostasy

The Babylonian Exile came about because the people of God wandered away into idolatry, sexual immorality and covenant infidelity. They forgot the Lord. They worshipped the so called gods of the nations, they engaged in cultic prostitution and they even made their children pass through the fire. They became like the nations and they invited the curse of God. Moses had told them what would happen if they went down that road. Way back in Deuteronomy he said:

the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known.⁶⁵ And among these nations you shall find no respite, and there shall be no resting place for the sole of your foot, but the LORD will give you there a trembling heart and failing eyes and a languishing soul. (Deuteronomy 28:64–65 ESV)

Prophecy fulfilled to the letter.

As this Levite Psalmist sat by the river and saw his old harp hanging in the tree on the other side he realized too late the awful truth that God is not mocked.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Hebrews 10:31 ESV)

Secondly this Psalm means to teach us:

2. How hard it is to worship the Lord in a foreign land

There are times when it feels really hard to worship. The Psalmist has been through unspeakable horrors. He has witnessed brutality, he has experienced hardship and loss and he is living far from the presence of God – or so it seems to him. How can you worship in times like that? How can you sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

That’s a good question. I get asked that as a pastor. How can I worship the Lord when my husband has cancer? How can I worship the Lord when my son has autism or my marriage lies in ruins? How can I worship the Lord in a broken and fallen world? That is the question.

Now, notice please what the question isn’t. He isn’t asking: “How can I pretend to be HAPPY when I am actually very sad?” That’s not the question and its really important that we understand that. We sometimes falsely equate worship with “happiness” as though to worship is to be happy – no it isn’t. That is part of the gift of this Psalms to us. This Psalm IS WORSHIP – this is the Song Book Of The Church - but its not happy. This is a lament, this is a cry to God for help and for justice – but it is worship. When you lift your heart up to God it is worship even when your heart is broken.

a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. (Psalms 51:17 KJV)

That’s how you worship in a foreign land – that’s how you worship in a broken world – you lift your broken heart up to God. You tell him how you feel. You tell him what happened and you ask him to see. You ask to remember and you ask him to act according to his nature.

Its hard – of course its hard; its not happy – but it is worship. That’s how you sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land.

Thirdly, this Psalm intends to teach us:

3. How just and how certain is the recompense of the Lord

O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed (Psalms 137:8 ESV)

That is not a curse – it is a statement of certainty. If God is who he is then this will not stand. If God honours his Word then this evil will not go unredressed. God said:

³⁵ Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly.’ ³⁶ For the LORD will vindicate his people (Deuteronomy 32:35–36 ESV)

The same God who declared exile as the punishment for apostasy – in the same book of the Bible – declares vengeance upon their oppressors.

The Psalmist who has come to experience the first prophecy has now put his hope in the second. If God did what he said he would do to us, then surely he will do what he said he would do to our oppressors. God is just and he does not lie.

Now, you might say, “Pastor, that’s in the Old Testament – that’s before God became a Christian!” – but actually this same chapter about God’s promise to avenge his people is quoted in the New Testament by the Apostle Paul. Quoting from Deuteronomy 32, which we just read he says:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” (Romans 12:19 ESV)

Don’t do this yourself, but don’t doubt that it will be done. Justice is deferred in the New Testament, but it is never disavowed.

Fourthly, and lastly, this Psalm intends to teach us:

4. How important it is to maintain hope in our future restoration

The harps on the branches of the willow reminded the exiles that they would one day return. One day we will cross the river – one day we will go home to Zion. We will sing! The Lord will not leave us in ruin! As he led us out of Egypt – so he will come for us again! The prophet Jeremiah foresaw that day – he saw the Exile and beyond it he saw restoration. He said:

¹⁴“Therefore, behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when it shall no longer be said, ‘As the LORD lives who brought up the people of Israel out of the land of Egypt,’ ¹⁵ but ‘As the LORD lives who brought up the people

of Israel out of the north country and out of all the countries where he had driven them.' **For I will bring them back** to their own land that I gave to their fathers.... **But first I will doubly repay their iniquity** and their sin, because they have polluted my land with the carcasses of their detestable idols, and have filled my inheritance with their abominations.” (Jeremiah 16:14–18 ESV)

I’m going to punish you – I’m going to discipline you, I’m going to break you down, God says, but then I’m going to redeem you, I’m going to build you up, I’m going to restore you and one day bring you home. Never forget that God’s ultimate and final purpose for his people is always for their good. Are you seeing that? All things – finally, ultimately and eventually – work together for the good of God’s people. All our experience – even the worst of them, in the end will be used by God to break us, humble us, save us, change us, renew us and finally to bring us home. That’s a promise in the Bible – Old Testament and New.

So that’s what this Psalm is teaching us; that’s what we need to understand, but because of the difficulty of this Psalm I want to spend just a few minutes talking about how to read and pray and use this Psalm as New Testament people. We said off the top that our goal is not just to explain the Psalms – it is also to reintroduce them as the poetry, prayer and hymnody of the church. So I want to ask the question:

Q: How Should We Use This Psalm As A New Testament People?

I don’t think this is the whole answer – but this is surely part of it:

A. Read/pray/sing Psalm 137 as a way of identifying with the persecuted church

This Psalm and the entire episode behind this Psalm becomes in the New Testament a symbol of the world culture at war with the church. The Apostle Peter even ended one of his letters by saying:

She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son. (1 Peter 5:13 ESV)

Now Peter wasn’t in Babylon when he wrote that letter – Babylon wasn’t even an inhabited city at the time – Peter wrote that from Rome. Peter is saying that Rome is like Babylon – a culture at war with the church – and he’s living in a van down by the River! It’s a figure! The Apostle John used the same figure – he regularly spoke of the culture at war with the saints under the

symbol of Babylon.

“Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth’s abominations.” (Revelation 17:5 ESV)

Now again – Babylon the actual city was a ruin by this time – John isn’t angry at an uninhabited city in the Middle East – he is using the Old Testament historical story to make a point. He is saying that the culture is still at war with the people of God. There is a spirit behind the culture that seeks to seduce God’s people away from him and into ruin. In John’s Apocalypse the “Whore of Babylon” rides on “a beast” that represents government and political structure. That is to say that she uses political power structures in her attempt to destroy the church. There is a demonic spirit behind the governments and political and military entities attacking the church!

Now, that may seem pretty far-fetched and rather fantastic to us sitting in our climate controlled church here in Canada – the nicest and safest and most polite country on planet earth. I bet you it doesn’t seem far-fetched AT ALL in Pakistan this morning. Or in Thailand. Or in India. Or in Egypt. Or in Iraq. Or in Iran. Or in North Korea. There are a lot of places where this reads like the morning news and this Psalm can help us to identify with those people.

Let me make something very clear my friends – a desire for God’s people to be vindicated and avenged and comforted and recompensed is NOT an Old Testament concept. Let me read to you from the New Testament.

⁹When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. ¹⁰They cried out with a loud voice, “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?”

And the Lord rebuked them and reminded them to love their enemies and to pray for those who persecute them – is that what the text goes on to say? No. It says this:

¹¹Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been. (Revelation 6:9–11 ESV)

God doesn’t rebuke them – he tells them to wait. Wait. Its not over yet – but it will be. Then John tells us what that looks like. He says:

“Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! (Revelation 18:2 ESV)

An angel cries:

Pay her back as she herself has paid back others, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed. (Revelation 18:6 ESV)

What does that sound like? It sounds EXACTLY LIKE Psalm 137:8.

Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, “So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence, and will be found no more (Revelation 18:21 ESV)

For:

in her was found the blood of prophets and of saints (Revelation 18:24 ESV)

That’s how it ends, John says. The world at war with God’s people is ultimately and finally thrown down. When our exile has done its work and when God has healed our hearts – he will bring us home and he will take vengeance upon our oppressors.

You can hold on to that for the day when you will need it – and you can pray it now on behalf of the persecuted church.

Then lastly, we can’t leave this Psalm without wrestling with one final question:

Q. How should I hear Psalm 137 as an unbeliever and a non-Christian?

Now, I think that Psalm 137 is in the Bible specifically for the comfort and encouragement of God’s people – particularly under duress. Canadian Christians may find it dark and unhelpful but it is ministering strength and healing and hope in many parts of the world today. But here, this morning, in Orillia - this Psalm has been heard by people who are not yet members of the covenant community; they are not yet “the people of God” through faith in Jesus Christ; how should they hear this Psalm? I would suggest that they should hear this Psalm:

A. Hear Psalm 137 as a call to consider the coming judgment

In the end, everyone stands before God. In the end everyone is separated into two camps. The Bible speaks about those two camps in many different ways under many different figures. They are the sheep and the goats. They are the two women – the Whore and the Bride. They are the

people of the Beast and the people of the Lamb and they are Babylon and Jerusalem. And in the end all those who are Babylon – those who are opposed to God and to his people – are judged and thrown down. About those people - that city, that woman – the Bible says:

she will be burned up with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who has judged her. (Revelation 18:8 ESV)

That fate does not need to be your fate. The other woman – the other city – the Bride of Christ and the Spirit beckon you to come; to come out of Babylon – to come unto Jesus and to be saved.

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” (Revelation 22:17 ESV)

That’s how the Bible ends! Come! Save yourself from this wicked generation – come unto Christ – cling to the cross – trust in his life, death and resurrection and be saved. Be restored – be home.

In the end – when its all over - God’s people go home! They cross the river, they pick up their harps and they sing the song of Zion. That is the future – that is our hope and this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.