

There was no place as far removed from Zion as sitting under poplars on the banks of the Euphrates. The prophets had warned the people that the day would come when Babylon would lay waste to Israel and carry her people into exile. But no warning could ever have prepared them for the nine hundred mile trek from Zion to Babylon. Yet with each mile walked the determination grew to remember the Lord and Zion. The Psalter pivots from praise to lament.

In 597 BC, thousands of Israel's leaders, soldiers, artisans and skilled craftsmen, were taken to Babylon in the first wave of exiles (52:28; 2 Kings 24:8-17). This first group included Jehoiachin, who succeeded Jehoiakim, and other notables, such as Daniel and Ezekiel (Dan.1:1-6; Ezek.1:2). They crossed the nine hundred miles of barren wasteland from Jerusalem to Babylon on foot and under armed guard. We would be naive if we thought this was not an ordeal of great suffering and privation. King Nebuchadnezzar was responsible for this cruel and evil captivity. He was God's instrument of judgment to punish Judah for her spiritual apostasy and disobedience. And in turn Jeremiah declared publicly that Babylon would be judged harshly for their oppression of Israel (Jer 50:1f). Exodus and exile have their place in God's salvation story.

Psalm 137 is found in a sequence of pilgrim psalms intent on keeping the big picture of God's sovereignty in view. The psalms of descent encourage pilgrims to return to their ordinary lives and normal routines in heartfelt praise and glad thanksgiving (Ps 135:1; 136:1). It is these positive psalms of descent that set the context for the most unwelcome descent of all – exiled to Babylon. Psalm 137 is a devastating and resilient communal lament. Its white hot passion is driven by a deep desire to remember the Lord in the midst of exile. There is not a hint of despair, only resolve. The God of gods and Lord of lords is not a tribal deity without jurisdiction in Babylon. The God of heaven is just as real in Babylon as he is in Zion. The people of God know this to be true and they are serious about remembering the Lord.

### *We Wept*

*By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
There on the poplars  
we hung our harps,  
for there our captors asked us for songs,  
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;  
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"  
How can we sing the songs of the Lord  
while in a foreign land?*

Psalm 137:1-4

The poet deftly sketches a poignant scene and lets our imaginations fill in the story. It is as if the exile can be summed up in a moment, in a single incident. Images of trees and rivers are symbols of delight, but the exiles can only think of Zion. The beauty of this strange land means nothing to

them when they remember Zion. They are ruled by the world's most impressive superpower, but Yahweh is their king and Zion is their home. They sit down in grief and weep. They are heartsick for what they have left behind and their captors only add to their misery by asking for songs. They hang up their lyres (more like a guitar than a modern harp) in the trees, because they don't have it them to sing. We imagine the mockery and ridicule of their tormentors who demand "songs of joy." Imagine a whole people belittled by oppressors. Then, picture a small group of Babylonian bullies demanding some entertainment. "Sing us one of the songs of Zion! Put on a show," they say. "Snap out of your woe-is-me attitude. There's nothing half as beautiful in your dry and dusty land as the beautiful tree-lined Euphrates."

The mockery leaves them with an ache in their hearts and a question, "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" The tenor and tone of the question implies a refusal. They can't possibly respond to their tormentors by singing a song of Zion. To sing as if nothing had happened, that they were not under judgment by the Lord or to pretend that their were not prisoners or to refuse to see their tormentors as oppressors, was impossible. They needed to remain true to who they were as the people of God, true to their identity in Zion.

This is all true, but Jeremiah, who was led by the Lord to remain in Jerusalem, counsels the exiles to make a positive contribution to Babylonian life. The prophet sent an open letter to the first wave of exiles in 594 BC to challenge them to accept the hard work ahead and to warn them against delusional alternatives. His letter must have impressed them as counter-intuitive. The strategy exemplified God's redemptive counter-cultural strategy. Instead of resisting their Babylonian oppressors, the Lord called the Israelites to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer 29:7). Jeremiah delivered a message of hope to the exiles. He wrote,

"For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,' declares the Lord, 'and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile'" (Jer 29:11-14).

Jeremiah's counsel, given about 600 years before Christ, gave the people of God a hint of the Gospel ethic to come. The apostle Peter wrote, "Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires. . . .Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. . . .But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 2:11-12; 3:15-16).

Given the counsel of Jeremiah we imagine the exiles learning to sing their songs of Zion!

*We Remember*

*If I forget you, Jerusalem,  
may my right hand forget its skill.  
May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth  
if I do not remember you,  
If I do not consider Jerusalem  
my highest joy.*

Psalm 137:5-6

Jeremiah's prophetic word of encouragement and hope may help account for the psalmist's shift from lament to confidence. Speaking personally and emphatically, the psalmist insists that he will always remember Jerusalem, which represents everything about Yahweh and his covenant love. In a word Jerusalem is a metaphor for the Name of Yahweh, Mount Zion, the City of God, and the New Jerusalem. Not to remember Jerusalem would be to forsake the Lord God. He vows his commitment and loyalty in the strongest terms, even "invoking upon himself the penalty of physical handicap (cf. Matt 5:28-30)."<sup>1</sup> Even as a foreign exile in Babylon, the psalmist pledges his passionate fidelity to the God of Zion. If Jerusalem is his "highest joy" one wonders how he can keep from singing the songs of Zion!

The exile afforded a new opportunity for the chosen people of God to discover all over again what it meant to live faithfully and obediently. The stranglehold of false spirituality, self-indulgent materialism and sexual promiscuity, that had squeezed the life out of Jerusalem, had been broken in Babylon of all places. They were given a fresh opportunity to live for God in a foreign land. God's plan for them, as it is for us, was to live in the world but not of the world

*We Call on the Lord to Remember*

*Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did  
on the day Jerusalem fell.  
"Tear it down," they cried,  
"tear it down to its foundations!"  
Daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction,  
happy is the one who repays you  
according to what you have done to us.  
Happy is the one who seizes your infants  
and dashes them to the rocks.*

Psalm 137:7-9

We vow to remember the Lord on pain of self-mortification but we have no trouble remembering our enemy's atrocities. The psalmist asks the Lord to remember what he cannot possibly forget. The pain of injustice and the anguish of man's inhumanity to man drives his passion in this

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, Psalms, 242.

closing section. The darkness of Edom's revenge and their unmitigated hate impact the psalmist's joy. Echoes of their betrayal and their glee over Jerusalem's destruction haunt the exiled Israelite. But the psalmist reserves his deepest animosity for Babylon who is "doomed to destruction" (Ps 137:8). He attributes blessing and happiness to "the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (Ps 137:8-9).

Most of us have never lived through the atrocities experienced by the exiles, but we know the powerful emotions of revenge and vengeance. The image of babies being smashed against the rocks is horrific, appalling, unimaginable, yet the hate that inspires such unthinkable acts of evil is within us all. We struggle with these imprecations, not only here but throughout the Psalms, trying to reconcile them with the gospel of Jesus Christ. How shall we understand this *prayer*? How did Jesus pray this psalm? "To cut this witness out of the Old Testament," writes Derek Kidner, "would be to impair its value as revelation, both of what is in man and of what the cross was required to achieve for our salvation."<sup>2</sup>

First, through prayer the people of God have a safe and significant way of expressing their dark emotions and moral pain. The moral outrage triggered by brutalities and atrocities must be brought to the Lord in prayer and left to his righteous judgment. We are challenged to look evil in the eye and call down judgment. In prayer we hate what God hates. We refuse to call the good evil and evil good. "Prayer is combat. Prayer brings us before God – and there, before God, we find ourselves grappling with "the world rulers of the present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12).<sup>3</sup>

Second, where we stand on the salvation time-line makes a difference. In an effort to preserve the identity of the people of God, the Israelites were instructed to form their own culture. Through diet, clothing, language, ritual, and the law, God separated out a people for himself. God chose to make a great nation out of an enslaved people. He redeemed them from bondage and set them apart to be a holy people (Gen 12:2-3). God chose one nation among the nations to deliver the message that Yahweh was the God of all creation and the Lord of history. Israel's integrity and survival as the people of God depended upon obeying God's specific command to destroy the nations that occupied the promised land (Deut 7:2-6). Israel and the church were *set apart* and *set above* for the holy purpose of revealing the one and only God to all the nations, but their respective strategies are polar opposites (1 Pet 2:9). The church is commanded to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20).<sup>4</sup> The militancy of Jesus is radically different from the militancy of Israel. The nationalistic strategy of the promised land is no longer viable in the light of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment.

Jerusalem and Babylon are symbols of God's eternal plan for judgment and salvation. Jerusalem,

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<sup>2</sup> Kidner, Psalms, 2:461.

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, Answering God, 95.

<sup>4</sup> Webster, Living in Tension, 2:7

the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, represents the rule and reign of God. Babylon embodies human success turned against the Lord God. But over time the meaning of Jerusalem becomes more complicated, because in her rebellion against God and in her refusal to accept the Lord's Anointed One she becomes like Babylon. Jesus pronounced judgment against Jerusalem: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you. . . . Look, your house is left to you desolate" (Matthew 23:37). Jesus equated Jerusalem and Babylon. They were both under the judgment of God. As the apostle Paul said, "There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:22-24). The apostle John used Babylon to symbolize not only the Roman Empire, but every secular and spiritual power that set itself up against the Kingdom of God, even Jerusalem. Down through the ages God has pronounced judgment against the spirit of Babylon. "Woe! Woe, O great city, O Babylon, city of power! In one hour your doom has come! (Rev.18:10).

Third, we pray Psalm 137 in the light of God's final judgment. The redemptive trajectory of the gospel of Jesus Christ holds out hope for forgiveness and salvation (2 Pet 2:9). "God will judge," writes Miroslav Volf, "not because God gives people what they deserve, but because some people refuse to receive what no one deserves; if evildoers experience God's terror, it will not be because they have done evil, but because they have resisted to the end the powerful lure of the open arms of the crucified Messiah."<sup>5</sup> To put this another way, to resist the love of God is the greatest evil we will ever do. If God's wrath and the consequences of evil are imaginary; if there is no final judgment day, if there is no hell, then Christians have no reason to shout "Fire!" But if the house is burning and danger is imminent, then Christ's love motivates believers to "rescue the perishing and care for the dying." John's Spirit-inspired vision shouts "Doom!" and "Danger!" at the top of his lungs. And against all reason many refuse to get out of the burning building.<sup>6</sup>

Finally and *thankfully*, the Lord remembered the Edomites and the Babylonians and *all the rest of us* in a way that the psalmist never imagined and in a way that our sins do not deserve (Ps 103:10). God Incarnate took on our humanity and became a baby, a vulnerable, weak, baby. Like those Edomites, "we were by nature deserving of wrath. But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved" (Eph 2:3-5).

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<sup>5</sup> Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace*, 298.

<sup>6</sup> Webster, *Follow the Lamb*, 164.