

Homesickness

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 137, verses 1 to 9. Let my right hand forget its skill.

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. Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, lay it bare, lay it bare down to its foundations.

O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall be he who repays you with what you have done to us. Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against a rock.

This is God's holy and authoritative word. According to city records, 28.8% of Cambridge residents were born in a foreign country.

And 12% of Cambridge residents didn't live in Massachusetts a year ago. So it's kind of crazy stats, right? And so 1 in 10 Cambridge residents, more than that, you meet, were out-of-state or out-of-country transplants.

[1 : 3 8] And so this is a city that's familiar with homesickness, feeling out of place, just not feeling like you belong.

And so that sense of being distressed by the distance from loved ones and from things that are familiar to you and longing for home. And Psalm 137 really is about that.

It's about longing for home, but in a much more significant way, because they're not only away, you know, for a time, their home's been destroyed. And it teaches us overall that as exiles in worldly Babylon, that we should long for the heavenly Jerusalem.

I think that's the main point of this psalm. So first we see in verses 1 to 6 our remembrance of Jerusalem. And then in verses 7 to 9, God's remembrance of Jerusalem. So let's look at our remembrance of Jerusalem beginning in verse 1.

It begins by putting Babylon and Zion side by side, which kind of highlights the sense of loss and separation. So it says, By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.

[2 : 4 8] So this psalm, we know from this verse that was written after the Babylonian exile in 586 BC. God's people are by the waters, which sounds pleasant and nourishing, but actually is not because when you get to the word Babylon.

It's by the waters of Babylon. This is not where God's people should be, but that's where they are. And there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion, the city of Jerusalem, which has been reduced to rubbles, and it survives only now in people's memory of the past.

And it's verses 2 to 3 continue that sad tale. It says, On the willows there we hung up our liars, for there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

So the phrase, On the willows there, also communicates the sense of kind of being out of place, because the word willows, it says in the footnote in the ESV, can be translated poplars.

I don't know if that's how you say the name of the tree, poplars. Is that right? Poplars, so it's not the kind of willow tree in like the Boston Garden. It's a poplar that's like a type of a willow kind of, and it's the Euphrates poplar.

[4 : 05] It's popularly known. It's a type of tree that grows by rivers. So like the rivers of Tigris and Euphrates, right? Tigris and Euphrates in Babylon. So it's a tree that's widespread popular, known in Babylon.

And so, again, that's a reminder that they're not where they're supposed to be. On the willows there, there we hung up our liars. For there are captors required of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

So this contrast of words kind of highlight the cruelty of Israel's exile, right? They demand songs of mirth while tormenting them, right?

They demand, you know, what is it here? They demand songs when they're keeping them captive. But this cannot be, right?

And you can notice, you might notice the repetition of the word there in verses one to three. By the waters of Babylon there, and then there by the willows in verse three.

[5 : 09] These are songs of Zion that cannot be sung there. It can only be sung when you are in God's land where God's promises are fulfilled because they are God's songs.

And that's what verse four says. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? The Lord's song, which speak of the joy that's found in the presence of God alone, the mirth of fulfillment of the promises of God.

Like, how can that be sung in a foreign land? And so the psalmist kind of makes a vow saying that he would lose his skill. He won't be able to play his instrument or he wouldn't be able to sing at all if he forgets Jerusalem.

So he says, verses five to six, if I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill. 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 the first section, verses one to six, begins and ends with the mention of remembering, remembering Zion, remembering Jerusalem. No matter how long this exile lasts, God's people are never to forget where their true home is, where God's promises are.

[6 : 15] And this is true for us as well, even though we're not part of the nation of Israel, we're not Jewish. And it's 1 Peter chapter one, verse one, Peter addresses the church, the Christians as elect exiles.

1 Peter 5, verse 13, he calls the church, she who is at Babylon. Because the Old Testament nation of Babylon, because of the Babylonian exile, becomes this symbol or a type of the center of worldly power and influence.

So in the New Testament, Babylon gets used that way symbolically. So then all Christians are those who are in exile in Babylon, right? According to the way Peter treats. So we are those exiles that Psalm 137, in a sense, here is talking about.

So as exiles in worldly Babylon, then we should also long for the heavenly Jerusalem. That's the main point of this passage. As Hebrews 12 and Revelation 21 speak of, the heavenly Jerusalem is our home.

And we should be anticipating that, longing for that, and waiting for that. And say, as the psalmist says in verse six, 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.

[7 : 32] It's a wonderful phrase, right? Above my highest joy. What is your highest joy, right, in life, right? Our longing for God, our longing for His abode, His home, should be above our highest joy, right?

So is God being united with God, being in His presence, being in awe of His glory, worshipping before His throne, is that above your highest joy?

Because if we are so satisfied by the joys of this worldly Babylon, so much so that we do not long for this heavenly Jerusalem, then that's a sign that we have forgotten the city of God.

And we are to remember. That's the exhortation of that passage. And if verses one to six is about our remembrance, verses seven to nine is about God's remembrance. It's a prayer for God's remembrance of Jerusalem.

So let's read it together. Verses seven to nine. Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, lay it bare, lay it bare down to its foundations.

[8 : 44] O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, 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.

This verse recalls not only what the Babylonians did, but also what the Edomites did. So Edomites were the descendants of Esau, right?

So they're technically brothers. But in Obadiah, the prophet just rails against the Edomites because when Babylonians were ransacking Jerusalem, the Edomites just watched idly by and let them have at it.

And so Obadiah is a denunciation of, the whole book is a denunciation of Edom. It says, In that day, Obadiah 8 to 11, declares the Lord, Will I not destroy the wise men of Edom, those of understanding in the mountains of Esau?

Your warriors, Teman, will be terrified and everyone in Esau's mountains will be cut down in the slaughter. Because of the violence against your brother, Jacob, you will be covered with shame. You will be destroyed forever.

[9 : 51] On the day you stood aloof while strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem. You were like one of them. So this is a prayer for divine vengeance which explains its shocking violence.

And it's not, and it's, there's some, it's, we shouldn't take the expression strictly, literally here because it mentions daughters of Jerusalem and then it mentions the little ones.

So it's referring not to like, let's go kill the babies. It's referring to the future generations of Edom, right? And the word, word Edom, the, if you look at 1 Kings 14, 7, one of the prominent cities of Edom was Sila or it's the, it's in Greek Petra.

You've probably heard of it, right? It means rock. So 1 Kings 14, 7 says, Amaziah, Amaziah, king of, Amaziah, king of Judah, struck down 10,000 Edomites in the valley of Saul and took Sila by storm, right?

So he talks about that as a, and so here, may your, blessed shall it be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock. So it's literally saying like dash them against the city itself, dash them against it, that may Edom be destroyed to its core.

[11 : 11] That's kind of what it's, that, what that image is. And, and it's a, it's a, it is a, you know, it's, I think it makes us uncomfortable, I think we're honest with it to talk about verses like this.

But I think people understand when they are, victim of, of grave injustice, that this, that there's something about justice that is necessary, right?

So for example, like, even with, I mean, when you see, for example, nowadays, let's say instances of, you know, racist kind of killings, right?

Let's say there's a, and, and when people see that and they're upset by that, what do they do? They call for murder charges, right? They want the guy jailed for life or in death row.

They want the guy's head, right? Because they're angry and they believe that's what justice demands. So people, when they're actually really angry and feel like they've been victimized, that's what they long for.

[12 : 17] They long for justice. And so there's a, P.D. James in her mystery novel, *Original Sin*, develops a character who says this to her Jewish colleague, if I had a God, I'd like him to be intelligent, cheerful, and amusing.

So this is a person saying, well, I want God to be just, you know, fun, entertaining, just to be a good companion. And then the Jewish colleague responds, I doubt whether you'd find him much of a comfort when they herded you into the gas chambers.

You might prefer a God of vengeance. And that's what this justice is, right? It's when, because you don't just look at one side of God's justice and wrath.

You have to look at what is engendering that because it's God's love for his people that makes him break out in wrath toward the oppressors of his people, right? So justice is also a flip side of love.

You can't have one without the other. And here, he's not calling for, you know, personal vengeance and retaliation. The psalmist, he's praying that God would take vengeance, right?

[13 : 32] And he's praying that God would remember his people. And so I don't think this is contradictory with the Christian ethic of love your enemies, you know, turn the other cheek.

It's because those are the principles of personal ethics and loving our enemies, right? But that's not, doesn't change the fact that God is going to bring justice and he's going to bring justice against his enemies.

And these are pictures of Edom and Babylon are representatives of those who oppose God himself, not just us and personally his people. And ultimately, you know, this psalm too is fulfilled in what Jesus has done because we see the fierceness of God's wrath toward injustice on the cross where Jesus is crucified, right?

That's the, we were enemies of God. We had, we had fought against him and yet he loved us and he poured out his wrath on his son instead on the cross and it's through that he brings about, he inaugurates the kingdom of God, right?

He begins the kingdom of God in a sense or he ushers in the kingdom of God so that it breaks into our own lives and it's not fulfilled yet, fully fulfilled yet.

[14 : 49] So we live in this already but not yet period, intervening period between Jesus' second, first coming and second coming and so because we're there, we experience some of this kingdom joy and mirth but not the fullness of it and so we are still suffering, we are still experiencing injustice and we are to long, instead of being satisfied in worldly Babylon, long for heavenly Jerusalem, continue to in our lives and so that's what this psalm is about.