

Psalm 137 • Remembering our past captivity

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Psalm chapter 137. This is an interesting Psalm.

Do you ever think back about the time when you were captive to sin? I'm not saying that once you become a Christian you stop sinning. I'm not saying that. I'm trying, though, to remind you of those times that you might think back upon where sin just overwhelmed you and you recognized, I'm stuck, and you needed to cry out to God, but you were in captivity.

This Psalm is really about remembering captivity, and it remembers particularly the Babylonian captivity. For those of you that don't know what I'm talking about, Israel struggled with idolatry for many years. Yes, the Jews struggled with idolatry. They were idolaters, and God sent prophet after prophet after prophet to confront them about their idolatry. They did not listen.

Eventually God said, all right, you guys like idol worship, I'm going to send you away for 70 years to live in the center of idol worship. And He sent them to Babylon. Of course, the entire time wasn't actually in Babylon per se, because during the 70 years, the Babylonians actually got conquered by the Medo-Persians, but they were still in captivity.

The point is that for 70 years, they had to endure the captivity that shows this is me in the midst of where I really deserve to be. This is me because I refused to listen to God, to hearken to His Word, and now I'm captive. There's this captivity, and this Psalm remembers that captivity, remembers the regret that Israel had related to that.

And can I tell you something about idolatry and Israel? When they came out of their captivity in Babylon after 70 years, they were cured. They never went back to idolatry again. God never confronted them about idolatry. Unfortunately, they tumbled into gross legalism by the time Jesus came on the scene, but not idolatry.

It was like, God said— it was just like He did with the quail. You remember when they were in the wilderness and they wanted meat? We want meat; we

miss having meat. And God said, you want meat? I'll give you meat. In fact, I'll give you so much meat it'll be coming out of your nostrils. It's not a great picture, but it's one of those things that God will do in our lives when we seek after the things of this world so much. Sometimes He'll give it to us and He'll let us fill up on it.

Have you ever eaten too much cotton candy or something stupid that has absolutely no nutritional value but you just want it? It's like, well, sometimes the best thing your parents can do is just let you eat it, and get sick, and learn that this is not good. Sometimes God does that as a parent. And so, yeah, they wanted idolatry; He gave them idolatry till it was literally like coming out— not literally, but coming out of their nostrils in that same sense of what happened in the wilderness. But it cured them. It cured them.

This Psalm helps us to remember our captivity, I think, so that we don't go back and repeat it and go back to bondage.

Verse 1:

*“By the waters of Babylon,
there we sat down and wept,
when we remembered Zion.* (For you and I, it would be when we remembered home.)

² *On the willows there
we hung up our lyres.* (And that's, of course, their musical instrument.)

³ *For there our captors
required of us songs,
and our tormentors, mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”* (ESV)

The Babylonians had this influx of Jews that have come into their land because they've been taken captive. And while they're there, the Babylonians say, hey, play us one of your songs, one of your Jewish songs. Let's hear it. Just play us a happy song.

Well, any song that the Jews had was about God. It was about praising God. It was about lifting up and exalting the name of God. And they're basically saying, here we are in the midst of our captivity and you want us to sing these songs of praise to our God? And you know what? We're just overwhelmed with regret. We shouldn't be here. We're here because of our disobedience.

And so, they asked the question in verse 4:

*“How shall we sing the LORD’S song
in a foreign land?”*

In other words, how should we sing about the blessing of God when we're living in the midst of our captivity? Here we are, literally enslaved by our own sinful passions. How can we sing the songs of the Lord?

He goes on to say in verse 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!
7 Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem,
how they said, “Lay it bare, lay it bare,
down to its foundations!”*

The Edomites, interestingly enough, actually encouraged the Babylonians when they came to conquer Israel. They encouraged the Babylonians to destroy Jerusalem, to destroy the temple. Even though the Edomites were blood relatives of the Israelites, they were against the Jews completely. This Psalm remembers it.

And now I want to just warn you, these last two verses of this Psalm are dark, but I'll hopefully be able to explain why. It says:

*“8 O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,
blessed shall he be who repays you
with what you have done to us!”*

And by the way, that was the Medes and the Persians. The Medo-Persian army came in and conquered the Babylonians, and they did to the Babylonians what the Babylonians did to the Jews. It was gruesome. In fact, it was very dark.

This verse calls upon the Lord to bless the one who pays back Babylon, and that sort of thing. Because you see, Babylon was the nation that God used to discipline His people, Israel, but they went beyond what God intended.

And that happened a lot. God would raise up a nation to come against Israel, to bring disciplinary action against His people in the midst of their disobedience, and those nations would go way beyond. They would want to just wipe them out completely. But that was not God's intention, and so God would come back and then judge that nation. What this Psalm is talking about is the judgment that is owed now to Babylon for their overextended cruelty to Israel.

And there's an important lesson that I think that you and I can gain from this, as it relates to Christians who may at times be called upon to bring some correction.

Let me just say this: If God ever uses you to bring some form of correction into the life of a brother or a sister because of something that they've done, some sinful action, some wrong sort of a something they've done, just remember, speak what the Lord gives you to speak, but do not speak more. Do what the Lord tells you to do, but do not do more. Do not go beyond the limitation of what God has given you to do, as it relates to communicating God's displeasure or whatever disciplinary action the Lord would have you to take.

Do you remember in the Book of Corinthians, Paul's 2nd letter? He had written them previously about a man in their fellowship who had engaged in some sinful activity, and now he called upon the church to bring disciplinary action against that man in the form of withdrawing fellowship.

But in 2 Corinthians, he wrote to the believers, telling them, challenging them to now restore the man not to go too far with their discipline but now to restore. Let me show you this passage on the screen where he says:

2 Corinthians 2:6-8 (ESV)

For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him.

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It's important that we see that in the Scripture. Don't go too far. Right?

The last verse of this Psalm, again, can appear rather dark, but it says:

*“Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones
and dashes them against the rock!”*

And basically, what the psalmist is saying is he's remembering how the Jewish children were murdered, how they were cruelly dashed against rocks to kill them. He's basically saying, may there be a blessing upon he who pays you back deed for deed for what you did against us.