

By the Rivers

Lamentation and Remembering

Psalm 137:1 "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.

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?

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!"

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

By the River of Choptank

IN TALBOT COUNTY, Eastern Shore, Maryland, near Easton [and [the Choptank River](#)] ... there is a small district of country, thinly populated, and remarkable for nothing

that I know of more than for the worn-out, sandy, desert-like appearance of its soul, the general dilapidation of its farms and fences, the indigent and spiritless character of its inhabitants, and the prevalence of ague and fever ... It is seldom mentioned but with contempt and derision, on account of the barrenness of its soil, and the ignorance, indolence, and poverty of its people. Decay and ruin are everywhere visible ... It was in this dull, flat, and unthrifty district, or neighborhood, surrounded by a white population of the lowest order, indolent and drunken to a proverb, and among slaves, who seemed to ask, “Oh! What’s the use?” every time they lifted a hoe, that I—without any fault of mine—was born, and spent the first years of my childhood.¹

So begins the autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom*. Somewhere around 1817—for slaves never knew exactly, he was born Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey. Twenty-one years later, in 1838, the soon to be named **Frederick Douglass** managed to flee the plantation by sneaking aboard a train bound for Philadelphia, where he

¹ **Frederick Douglass**, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York and Auburn: Miller, Orton & Co., 1857), 33-34.

would, in time, become one of the leading voices in America for abolition.

It was in the year 1852, at the annual **July 4th celebration** held at the Corinthian Hall in Rochester NY that Douglass found himself the keynote speaker. What would he say? Before I tell you, it will be helpful to allow Mr. Douglass to explain in his own words just a couple of things about life growing up as a slave in Maryland. For, as a group, we are a people as personally far removed from his low estate as a slum apartment in Five Points is removed from the Governor's mansion on Capitol Hill. Though it be only a couple miles distant, it is another world away.

On life as a child, prior to being mercilessly taken away from his family one “**beautiful summer morning**”² Douglass writes,

Slave-children *are* children, and prove no exceptions to the general rule. The liability to be separated from my grandmother, seldom or never to see her again, haunted me. I dreaded the thought of going to live with that mysterious “old master,” whose name I never heard mentioned with

² 45.

affection, but always with fear. I look back to this as the heaviest of my childhood's sorrows.³

Slaves know the great cruelty man can perpetrate upon fellow man. Listen to him explain the irony of the happy life of a slave boy,

The first seven or eight years of the slave-boy's life are about as full of sweet content as those of the most favored and petted *white* children of the slaveholder. The slave-boy escapes many troubles which befall and vex his white brother. He seldom has to listen to lectures on propriety of behavior, or on anything else. He is never chided for handling his little knife and fork improperly or awkwardly, for he uses none. He is never reprimanded for soiling the table-cloth, for he takes his meals on the clay floor. He never has the misfortune ... of soiling or tearing his clothes, for he has almost none to soil or tear. He is never expected to act like a nice little gentleman, for he is only a rude little slave ... His food is of the coarsest kind, consisting for the most part of cornmeal mush, which often finds it[s] way from the wooden tray to his mouth in an oyster shell ... He always

³ 39-40.

sleeps in airy apartments ... He eats no candies; gets no lumps of loaf sugar ... [and] cries but little, for nobody cares for his crying.⁴

On his last of many beatings at the cruel hands of his owner, just before escaping he laments,

Sleep does not always come to the relief of the weary in body, and broken in spirit; especially is it so when past troubles only foreshadow coming disasters. My last hope had been extinguished. My master ... had cast me back, covered in reproaches and bruises, into the hands of one who was a stranger to that mercy which is the soul of the religion he professed. May the reader never know what it is to spend such a night as was that to me, which heralded my return to the den of horrors from which I had made a temporary escape ... I would fain pray; but doubts arising, partly from my neglect of the means of grace, and partly from the sham religion which everywhere prevailed, cast in my mind a doubt upon all religion ... I had no friend on earth, and doubting if I had one in heaven ... Covey darted out at me from a fence corner, in which he had secreted himself for the purpose of securing me. He was provided with a cowskin

⁴ 40-42.

and a rope, and he evidently intended to tie me up, and wreak his vengeance on me to the fullest extent.⁵

I should mention one more thing before reading a rather stunning excerpt from his speech. Frederick Douglass [became a Christian](#). In his own words:

Previously to my contemplation of the anti-slavery movement and its probable results, my mind had been seriously awakened to the subject of religion. I was not more than thirteen years old, when in my loneliness and destitution I longed for some one to whom I could go, as to a father and protector. The preaching of a white Methodist minister, named Hanson, was the means of causing me to feel that in God I had such a friend. He thought that all men, great and small, bond and free, were sinners in the sight of God: that they were by nature rebels against His government; and that they must repent of their sins, and be reconciled to God through Christ. I cannot say that I had a very distinct notion of what was required of me, but one thing I did know well: I was wretched and had no means of making myself otherwise. I consulted a good old colored

⁵ [Frederick Douglass](#), *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (Hartford: CT, Park Publishing, 1882), 163-65.

man named Charles Lawson, and in tones of holy affection he told me to pray, and to “cast all my care upon God.” This I sought to do; and though for weeks I was a poor, broken-hearted mourner, traveling through doubts and fears, I finally found my burden lightened, and my heart relieved. I loved all mankind, slaveholders not excepted, though I abhorred slavery more than ever. I saw the world in a new light, and my great concern was to have everybody converted. My desire to learn increased, and especially, did I want a thorough acquaintance with the contents of the Bible.⁶

By the River of Genesee

It is with this background that I give you the relevant words from his July 4 Independence speech somewhere near [the Genesee River](#) in Rochester. To the mostly white audience he boldly said,

I say it with a sad sense of the disparity between us. I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! Your high independence only reveals the immeasurable distance

⁶ *Life and Times*, 110-111.

between us. The blessings in which you this day rejoice, are not enjoyed in common. The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine. You may rejoice, I must mourn. To drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, were inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony. Do you mean, citizens, to mock me, by asking me to speak today? If so, there is a parallel to your conduct. And let me warn you that it is dangerous to copy the example of a nation whose crimes, towering up to heaven, were thrown down by the breath of the Almighty, burying that nation in irrecoverable ruin! I can to-day take up the plaintive lament of a peeled and woe-smitten people. *“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yea! we wept when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there, they that carried us away captive, required of us a song; and they who wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget*

her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.”⁷

It is incumbent upon each of you to truly **grasp the gravity** of these words. This is not 2018, where slavery is illegal everywhere and has been for over 150 years. This is 1852, and slavery is still very much legal in half the states. They had invited a man to come and speak about independence who personally knew scores of friends and family members who were not allowed any such freedom. Perhaps they thought it a nice gesture. But truly, it must have felt like a profound mockery to him—if they really expected he should sing Yankee Doodle Dandy while his kin were being whipped and beaten and never even knew what macaroni was.

This is the situation our Psalmist looks back upon, even as it is the same song that Douglass used to make such a piercing point to his audience. And unless you can enter into this condition on some kind of emotional level, you will be mocking Psalm 137 in one way or another.

⁷ Douglass, “What To The Slave is the Fourth of July?” in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 441-442.

By the Dark Rivers

Psalm 137 is a dark lament that, “Depicts the grief of the Israelites captured and driven into [exile] following the siege and destruction of Jerusalem in about 600 BC. It is a cry of despair mixed with rage. The despair is not just personal – these were court musicians and singers, respected and admired, mourning the destruction not only of their homes, but the home of their God, Solomon’s Temple.”⁸ These words were said by another Douglas, this time a choir director from Australia who recently put together a full evening of music with this as its main theme. I thought to myself, “*This is unusual to have even one, let alone two Douglas’ in a sermon that aren’t me.*” All the more given that the name Douglas means “from the dark river.” Maybe there’s a reason I’m drawn to this song and so badly want you to “get it.”

How? Because the song begins by singing from **the streams of a dark river**. But so that you will see the relevance

⁸ “By the Waters of Babylon: Australian Chamber Choir Directed by Douglas Lawrence,” <http://www.auschoir.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/By-the-Waters-of-Babylon-Program-notes.pdf>

of the song before even looking at it in detail, know that it has had a long run in the musical history of the West. From **Bach's** Soothing “An Wasserflüssen Babylon,”⁹ to **Liszt's** somber “Psalm 137,”¹⁰ it has been re-created to speak to contemporary situations from the British Invasion of Boston,¹¹ to the plight of the people of Haiti.¹² **Leonard Cohen** may have the most profound take on it when he sang,

By the rivers dark I wandered on.
I lived my life in Babylon.
And I did forget my holy song:
and I had no strength in Babylon.¹³

Of this song it has been written, “The main thrust of the rewriting is this, that the modern world itself is Babylon and man cannot leave it. The normalization of Babylon, however, forces us to ask ourselves how we start in our

⁹ **J. S. Bach**, “<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ExQR3UQlno>.”

¹⁰ **F. Liszt**, “Psalm 137,” performed by Anna Mayilyan, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=USJRiPKNEXw>.

¹¹ **William Billings**, “Lamentation over Boston,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RTcB3dvtgd>

¹² Originally from **The Melodians**, this was covered most famously by **Boney M.** <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYK9iCRb7S4>

¹³ **Leonard Cohen**, “By the Rivers Dark,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JLyKrioSFRw>

modern lives to look for something beyond the things that drive us crazy. Our new situation is an exile; we are wanderers now, like it or not. This the psalmist promises never to forget” and the writer adds, “never to forgive”¹⁴ (I’ll have more to say about this later). The point I’m making here is that it is not enough to see *the Israelites* in slavery long ago, or even people like the tribes of Africans that were forced against their will to become *slaves in America*. You need to see this **personally**, and how you can do that will be the thrust of all that we will discuss from here on out.

But to show you this upfront, let me show you how **the structure** of the song lends itself to this idea.¹⁵ It is a simple chiasm:

- A. Weeping (137:1-4)
- B. Forgetting (5-6a)
- C. Exalting (6b)

¹⁴ Titus Techera, “Leonard Cohen and the Babylonian Exile of the Modern World,” *National Review* (Nov 12, 2016), <https://www.nationalreview.com/2016/11/leonard-cohen-obituary-by-the-rivers-dark/>.

¹⁵ Several studies of this have been done including, Morris Halle, “The Metrical Structure of Psalm 137,” *JBL* 100/2 (1981): 161-167.

http://people.umass.edu/jjmccart/metrical_structure_of_psalms_137.pdf; William H. Shea, “Qinah Meter and Strophic Structure in Psalm 137,” *HAR* (1984): Biblical and Other Studies in Honor of Sheldon H. Blank, ed. R. Ahroni (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1985): 199-214. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/1707/6320aba149d8d53e5de29b43afe9800b4b82.pdf>.

B¹. Remembering (7)
A¹. Happiness (8-9)

It is the exaltation of what comes in the middle that is the central focus of the song, and when you learn what that is, you may quickly see how it can apply to you today.

By the Rivers of Babylon

Not only the structure, but also **the geography** of the song and the way the Bible reflects on that geography in other places, lends itself to the need to apply this personally in our day to these dozens of centuries later.

Psalm 137 begins with one of the most familiar lines of any of the Psalms. “**By the rivers¹⁶ of Babylon**” (Ps 137:1). **Babylon.**¹⁷ Anti-city. Evil-opolis. Notorious in the Bible as the first city to rebel against God (Gen 11—Babel); infamous as being the archetype of wickedness in Revelation, “**BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF**

¹⁶ The ESV and RSV are among the only major translations that render *nahar* (stream, river) as “waters.”

¹⁷ “Its present name comes from the Hellenized form of the Akk *Bab-Ilu*, literally meaning “the gate of god” which appears in the Bible in the usual form as ‘Babel.’” Jean-Claude Margueron, “Babylon (Place),” ed. David Noel Freedman, trans. Paul Sager, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 563.

HARLOTS AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH” (Rev 17:5).

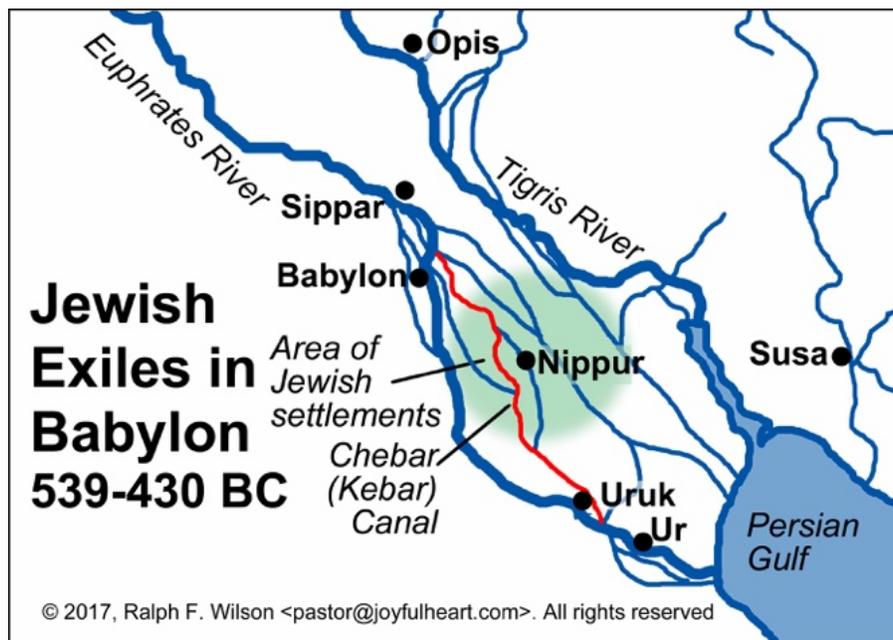
Babylon had stormed into Israel, to the applause of neighboring nations, around 597 B.C. Someone tells it like this,

Merciless Babylon had laid siege to Jerusalem long enough to cause widespread starvation. Finally, the Babylonian troops breached the city walls, looted treasures, and scorched buildings. They slaughtered the young, old, and infirm. Most they killed by sword, spear, and arrow, but small children—well, small children they dashed to the ground. That’s how ancient armies conducted war. It prevented the children from growing up to seek revenge and it terrorized parents into submission. The Babylonians then shackled survivors and marched them into exile.¹⁸

Thus, the Jews became slaves in a way that isn’t dissimilar to that of Frederick Douglass, his ancestors, and so many others.

¹⁸ Jean E. Jones, “5 Things You Never Knew about Psalm 137:9,” *Crosswalk.com* (March 1, 2017), <https://www.crosswalk.com/faith/bible-study/5-things-you-never-knew-about-psalm-137-9.html>

This makes the rivers by which they sang dark indeed. It isn't that the place itself was *physically* dark. In fact, Babylon, known for its fabled Hanging Gardens, was a spot of great fertility and abundant water. As far as geography goes, the depiction of abundant water shows that they were not necessarily lacking in good things. But that is part of the seduction of the place, a place I might add that was the home of Abram when he was called to leave his home and his gods (probably the wicked moon god Sin, pronounced "seen") and go to a land he did not know.¹⁹ Certain darkness can feel quite light at times.



¹⁹ As you can see, Ur is nearby in the map. It is from Ur of the Chaldeans that Abram was called ([Gen 11:28, 31; 15:7](#)).

What do I mean by **the seduction**? Well, think about the depiction of Babylon as **a mother of harlots**. What do harlots do? **They entice** men into sleeping with them for money. The pleasure, the risk, the adrenaline all go into the lure and attraction. But in the end, it is death.

Now look at the situation of the psalmist and the singers. **First**, they were *by the waters*. They were not in a desert, but in a place of abundance. When I was in Nepal recently, I saw a score of women all washing their clothes together in a river. It was work, yes. But also a time of friendship and community. **Second**, they have lyres (harps). It is probable that this includes the ability to sing together in a way that allowed them to carry out the worship of their God. In fact, as we learn from the likes of Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, Daniel, Nehemiah, Ezra, Esther, and others, it was quite possible not only to live in Babylon (and later Persia), but even to flourish.

Someone explains this when commenting later in the song about how they are singing this song no longer in Babylon, but somewhere in Israel after the return to the land, “**Babylonia is now there, far away; the faithful Jews**

have left their living there, with its security, prosperity and enjoyments, in order to settle back in Jerusalem.”²⁰ That’s the thing, even about forced relocation. After enough time has elapsed, this becomes the new normal. It becomes home. It becomes secure and safe. And that’s the temptation. **No matter how horrible things may also be in it or regarding how it came to pass** that you arrived there. It isn’t home, but you start to think it is. And in the case of Israel, you can become worldly and forget.

Let’s now move into the song itself and try to understand the flow of its thoughts, the reason for its lament, and the direction it takes which is so stunning, so inexplicable, that most rewrites of the song simply leave it out. Then we will try to understand what it meant for them and what it means for us today.

Weeping by the Waters (1-4)

Psalm 137 tells us a story. It is the story of a people gathering by the waters of Babylon who sit down and **begin to weep (1)**. Why are they weeping? Because they

²⁰ **Goulder**, *Psalms of the Return*, 228.

“remembered Zion.” 1000 miles away, Zion is Jerusalem, the place of their origin, the home of their ancestors, the abode of their God. This is the place God had chosen to put his Name. Now, all that was has been destroyed, razed to the ground by a vicious enemy bent on world domination. And they begin, communally, to weep. The tears from their collective eyes create rivers of sorrow which rise in their hearts and begin to drown all other thoughts. It almost seems like this is a planned thing (“we”), perhaps a national day of lamentation or fasting, the kinds of which our own Confession prescribes for us in days of great need for the grace of God.

As they go down to the river, it tells us that they hung their lyres on the willows there (2). We don’t know exactly what kind of tree this was, but it is certainly possible that it was something like a weeping willow, which at the very least metaphorically fits the context. What are they hanging them there for? Are they “hanging them up” like a boxer would his gloves? Or are they hanging them for the moment, because of some unique situation?

Vs. 3 indicates that it is a unique situation. “For there our captors required of us songs.” Is this good or bad? Do

the Babylonians simply want to hear the Israelites sing because they were particular good at it? No! They are called “our tormentors.” And the songs they want them to sing are songs of “mirth” (laughter, delight, merriment). “Sing us one of those songs of Zion.” Calvin says, “We may be certain that the Israelites were treated with cruel severity under this barbarous tyranny to which they were subjected. And the worst affliction of all was, that their conquerors reproachfully insulted them, and even mocked them...” How can anyone sing happy songs about that?

Forgetting What? (5-6a)

They can't, at least not in their spirit. They can sing *other kinds of songs*. For the slaves in America, those songs were Negro spirituals, so many of which remembered (importantly) not Africa but the *celestial* home “... *cross Jordan*.” But in order to sing about that place, you have to first “remember” it. This is what the *second part* of the song sings. “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” (5-6). This is the Levitical temple singers swearing imprecations against their calling as singers and skills as harpists and musicians. Spurgeon says,

To sing Zion’s songs for the pleasure of Zion’s foes, would be to forget the Holy City. Each Jew declares for himself that he will not do this; for the pronoun alters from ‘we’ to ‘I.’ Individually the captives pledge themselves to fidelity to Jerusalem, and each one asserts that he had sooner forget the art which drew music from his harp-strings than use it for Babel’s delectation. Better far that the right hand should forget its usual handicraft, and lose all its dexterity, than that it should fetch music for rebels out of the Lord’s instruments, or accompany with sweet skill a holy Psalm desecrated into a common song for fools to laugh at.”²¹

The Targum gets a little interpretive in this psalm compared to most. But it really makes Spurgeon’s words come to life. Here it reads, “At once the Levites cut off their thumbs with their teeth, and said, “How shall we sing the song of the LORD in a foreign land?” This takes tearing

²¹ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Psalms 120-150*, vol. 6 (London; Edinburgh; New York: Marshall Brothers, n.d.), 228.

your clothes and sitting in dust and ashes to a whole different level. This is cruel subjection and merciless taunting and mocking of a God whom the Babylonians think is impotent, for they do not understand that it was his will that this should all happen in the first place.

Remembering Correctly (7)

The focus is on “Jerusalem.” But **Jerusalem where?** The seemingly obvious answer is actually a little more complicated. But it is important to understand. First, it is **Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel**, the city of David, the home of the temple and the kings of Israel. This is obvious.

The song gets at this in **vs. 7** when it tells us, “**Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, ‘Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations.’**” This is history. Edom, who through Esau were cousins to the Jews, became one of their great enemies, even as Esau himself became the enemy of Jacob for a time. **Obadiah’s** prophecy predicts its demise for in his words, “**On the day that you stood aloof, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth and foreigners entered his gates and**

cast lots for Jerusalem, you were like one of them” (Obad 1:11).

They had conspired with the Babylonians even though, centuries earlier, God through Moses had spared them when they were capturing all the land on the conquest (see Dt 2:4). Calvin is thus right to say, “It was, therefore, the height of cruelty in them to invite the Babylonians to destroy their own brothers, or fan the flames of their hostility.” For it, Edom would be completely destroyed and its people lost to all memory, even as it is to this day.

Happy is He (8-9)

Emphasizing this historical event against the city and people of Jerusalem even more is the end of the song, upon which verses we must tread very carefully. It moves from remembering Edom to being happy about Babylon. Not their present situation in it, but its future demise.

“O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, happy (“blessed;” ESV) shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us!” (Ps 137:8). This verse is very important if for no other reason than that it becomes the

explanation for **vs. 9**, one of the most difficult to hear verses in the Bible—so difficult, in fact, that most renditions of this song, either leave it out or, as the choice selected to represent it in our own hymnal does, completely blunts its sharp edge.²² The offending line reads, “**Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock.**”

These words have caused this song to be dubbed, “**The ‘psalm of violence’ par excellence, and, at least in its full text, to be rejected by Christians.**”²³ Why? Sometimes, **people fail to realize the context.** Other times, as in this quote which comes from a Dissertation on Psalm 137, it comes from **theological presuppositions that blind a person** even when they do understand it. In the case of the quote, it is a failure to see continuity between the Testaments.²⁴ In the case of so

²² **Going Deeper.** #771 in the *Trinity Hymnal: Baptist Edition*. The line reads, “Remember, Lord, the dreadful day | Of Zion’s cruel overthrow | How happy he who shall repay | The bitter hatred of her foe.” This is really quite terrible. Much better is something like William Cowper’s “Thou too, great Babylon, shalt fall | A victim to our God | Thy monstrous crimes already call | For Heav’n’s chastising rod | Happy who shall thy little ones | Relentless dash against the stones | And spread their limbs abroad.”

²³ **Bobby J. Gilbert**, “An Exegetical and Theological Study of Psalm 137” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1981), 58.

²⁴ **John Day** writes, “Gilbert dismisses the *lex talionis* as a proper foundation upon which the New Testament believer could utter imprecations. Instead, he argues that “when Paul requests the judicial wrath of God upon those who do not love the Lord (1 Cor. 16:22) or upon those who preach a different gospel (Gal. 1:8, 9), he does so on the basis that it is God’s revealed will that sin be punished (Rom. 6:23) and that it is God’s will that evil men will one day be eternally condemned (Rev. 20:11-15).” *Ibid.*, 82. However, it is difficult to see how this differs materially from the issue in the Old Covenant. Saints in both testaments appeal to the

many other misreadings, it is a failure to come to grips with the fact that this is not the psalmist seeking personal retribution, but rather is a recognition that prophecy will be fulfilled and God will repay. In both instances, the heart of the problem is **not taking seriously enough the lasting nature of the *Lex Talionis***.

We need to spend a moment here. The *Lex Talionis* (Lit: “law of retaliation”) is more famously simply as “**an eye for an eye**” (**Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21**). It is a law that Jesus himself restates, but does so in the also badly misunderstood Sermon on the Mount.²⁵ Remember, he “**did not come to abolish the law.**”

What is “an eye for an eye?” It is not wicked. It is not unjust. It is, rather, the definition of justice and fairness. If you deliberately take someone’s eye, justice demands fair compensation. The ultimate fair compensation is the same thing in return. Those who hate this law hate justice. There’s no other way to put it. Most often it is because they are the

revealed will of God as the basis of their imprecations, and this revealed will of God in both testaments is essentially identical.” **John N. Day**, “The Imprecatory Psalms and Christian Ethics,” (D.Phil thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001), n. 68.

https://faculty.gordon.edu/hu/bi/ted_hildebrandt/otesources/19-psalms/text/books/day-imprecatorydiss/day-imprecatorypsalms.htm#_ftn6

²⁵ For more on this see my sermons on those passages.

© Reformed Baptist Church of Northern Colorado and Pastor Doug Van Dorn 24

All Rights Reserved

ones perpetrating great *injustice* upon others, and they don't want the law to make them pay back what is fair.

What's going on in Psalm 137 is that Babylon is going to be “repaid by having precisely what she did to the Jews done back to her. Verse 9 names the crime: killing babies. To the exiles, such justice would show that God stands up for the oppressed and cares about righting wrongs.”²⁶ This was basically Frederick Douglass' warning to a wicked nation that refused to end slavery.

How do we know this is what is going on? Two ways. First, Isaiah predicted it, importantly ... of Babylon! “Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished” (Isa 13:16). The psalmist isn't having a bad morning. Rather, he is showing faith in prophecy! Second, Revelation gives us its fulfillment, “... for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. Pay her back as she herself has paid back others [this is the definition of *Lex Talionis*] and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double portion for her in the cup she mixed ... Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God

²⁶ Jones, “Five Things You Never Knew about Psalm 137:9.”

has given judgment for you against her!’ 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” (Rev 18:5-6, 20-21).

Jerusalem “Above” (6b)

This now leads us straight away into the need to talk about the center of the song and the other aspect of both Babylon and Jerusalem that it is singing about. This is something the slaves knew quite well. Not merely physical cities, but **spiritual counterparts** when the Lord is *comin’ for to carry me home*.

You see, Jerusalem represented something beyond just being a city. First, this was **the place of forgiveness**,¹ the opposite idea that we saw above someone has in mind when he reads vs. 9. One thinks of **1 Kings 8** with regard to all of this. “If they sin against you-- for there is no one who does not sin-- and you are angry with them and give them to an

enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near ... if they repent with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name, then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you” (1Kg 8:46, 48-50).

Basically, Psalm 137 is a reflection on this very text.

If Jerusalem is the place of forgiveness, then Babylon is the place of wickedness and sin (even as we have seen). Charles Wesley gets at this when he translates this verse in his rendition,

Happy is the man that sees in you
The mystic *Babylon* within;
And, fill'd with holy cruelty,
Disdains to spare the smallest sin,
But sternly takes your little ones,
And dashes all against the stones.

You in your turn shalt be brought low.
Your kingdom shall not always last;
The Lord shall all your power o'erthrow.
And lay the mighty waster waste;
Destroy your being with your power,
And pride and self shall be no more.²⁷

Do you hear how in spiritualizing Babylon, he has moved to a contemporary application of sin dwelling within your heart? It makes me think of Frederick Douglass' conversion story. And unless there is in your heart a deep conscious understanding of your rebellion against God and a desire to dash your sins against the stone, nothing else that is said here today will matter. For you will be dead in your sins and unable to understand a word of this good news.

Good news? Yes, for Wesley doesn't merely look within here. He makes the whole thing eschatological (forward pointing), which is more in line with what the Scripture does with Babylon and Jerusalem. This is ultimately about Christ's kingdom and what you are going to do with him. Our Lord himself explains this when he alludes to our song

²⁷ John Wesley and Charles Wesley, *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn, vol. 8 (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1870), 254.

in his parable of the Tenants that he spoke to the Jewish leaders of his day, leaders who had sung this very song hundreds of times but never truly understood its meaning.

“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits. And the one who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; and when it falls on anyone, it will crush him” (Matt 21:43-44). What stone? Jesus says, “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone” (Luke 20:17).²⁸ That stone is Christ (Psalm 118:22; cf. Acts 4:11; 1Pe 2:7). Indeed, ultimately as Jim Adams says,

The Lord Jesus Christ is praying these prayers of vengeance. The prayers that cry out for the utter destruction of the psalmist's enemies can only be grasped when heard from the loving lips of our Lord Jesus. These prayers signal an alarm to all who are still enemies of King Jesus. His prayers will be answered! ... All the enemies of the Lord need to hear these prayers of Christ proclaimed today. They are not the prayers

²⁸ The Greek word for “broken” is *sunthlao*. The LXX uses a different word to translate the Psalm—*edaphidzo*. However, this is the same word used in Luke 19:44 (“and will dash you to the ground and your children within you”), a passage James Adams put as the third parallel in the Gospels to our Psalm. James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1991), 121.

of a careless and compassionless tyrant, but the effectual prayers of the Lamb of God who bore the curse of God for the sins of all who bow their knee to Him. The wrath of the psalms must be preached as the wrath of the Lamb of God. God's kingdom is at war!²⁹

Those who know and love this King have their eyes set on his kingdom, on Jerusalem that is above (**Gal 4:26**; **Heb 12:22**; **Rev 3:12**; **21:2, 10**). This is the spiritual counterpart to spiritual Babylon. In this way, Jerusalem which became their greatest joy becomes the Christians, and they can sing with the songs center, “I ... set Jerusalem above my highest joy” (**Ps 137:6**).

By the River Whose Streams Make Glad The City of Our God

Left as an end to itself, that is remembering or seeing only the evils of Babylon after being freed from slavery, is

²⁹ **Adams**, 33-34. In fact, the Targum actually reinforces his point. In a fascinating couple of additions it says rather than “If I forget you, O Jerusalem...” (vs. 5), “The voice of the Holy Spirit answered, and said, “If I forget you...” And even more interestingly, rather than, “Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites...” it says, “Michael the prince of Jerusalem said, ‘Remember, O LORD...” (it also has Gabriel say vs. 8).

to not understand the “the rest of the story.” It reminds me a great deal of the mentality of some people today. These are people who want you to think they are the only ones who care about racism and slavery, yet simultaneously can’t stop thinking about the topic in a way that seeks retribution for people whose great grandparents weren’t even alive when it happened. That’s not an eye for an eye, because those who perpetrated the evils are long since dead. Its just unmitigated hatred that knows nothing of forgiveness and love.

But some people can only see this in Psalm 137 because they get stuck on what even the great C. S. Lewis said about the last verse at least at one point in his life. This is “**Devilish ... where a blessing is pronounced on anyone who will snatch up a Babylonian baby and beat its brains out against the pavement.**”³⁰ When you only see what you want to see and do not allow Scripture to interpret itself, just like today’s neo-Marxist descendants of slaves six generations back who want nothing but revenge all this time later and who have such pitiable loathing and disdain for other human beings in their hearts, if that’s what you do with Psalm 137 and if that’s all you can see, the only end for you is personal

³⁰ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harvest, 1958), 20-21.

disaster. This is the opposite of the happiness that comes when the song is properly understood. For that happiness is not in personal retribution, but it is letting God have vengeance so that you can love your neighbor as yourself. He will surely do what is right; you almost certainly will not.

But when you understand as another psalm says that there is another “river whose streams make glad the city of God [Jerusalem that is above]” (Ps 46:4), then beloved, you are on your way not only to understanding the song, but to internalizing its glorious message. It is a message that can only do one thing. Burst a heart wide open with praise and thanksgiving with rhapsody and ecstasy that new have ever known.

To that end, allow me one more time to speak to you in the words of Frederick Douglass. This time as he contrasts how it felt the night he escaped his slavery to how it felt to finally be in a free city.

A poor degraded chattel—trembling at the sound of your voice, lamenting that I was a man, and wishing myself a brute. The hopes which I had treasured up for weeks of a safe

and successful escape from your grasp [he is writing this to his former master], were powerfully confronted at this last hour by dark clouds of doubt and fear, making my person shake and my bosom to heave with the heavy contest between hope and fear. I have no words to describe to you the deep agony of soul which I experienced on that never-to-be-forgotten morning ... You, sir, can never know my feelings. As I look back to them, I can scarcely realize that I Have passed through a scene so trying.³¹

Vs.

I have often been asked, how I felt when first I found myself on free soil. And my readers may share the same curiosity. There is scarcely anything in my experience about which I could not give a more satisfactory answer. A new world had opened upon me. If life is more than breath, and the 'quick round of blood,' I lived more in one day than in a year of my slave life. It was a time of joyous excitement which words can but tamely describe. In a letter written to a friend soon after reaching New York, I said: 'I felt as one might feel upon escape from a den of hungry lions.' Anguish and grief,

³¹ Douglass, "Letter To His Old Master: To My Old Master, Thomas Auld," in *Bondage and Freedom*, 422.

like darkness and rain, may be depicted; but gladness and joy, like the rainbow, defy the skill of pen or pencil.³²

The former is what it is surely like to those who, realize it or not, are still living under a much more malevolent old master than any slave ever knew, and that is saying something. This, beloved, is the condition of all men, women, and children—in bondage to sin and the devil until that moment they are released by the Holy Spirit through the quickening Gospel of Jesus Christ. *Though*, they may not even realize it. Douglass puts it this way,

I was a SLAVE—born a slave—and though the fact was incomprehensible to me, it conveyed to my mind a sense of my entire dependence on the will of *somebody* I had never seem; and, from some cause or other ... Born for another's benefit, as the *firstling* of the cabin flock I was soon to be selected as a meet offering to the fearful and inexorable *demigod*, whose huge image on so many occasions haunted my childhood's imagination.³³

³² *Bondage and Freedom*, 336.

³³ *Bondage and Freedom*, 45.

Therefore, do not forget Zion, Jerusalem where God sits on his royal throne from whence he dispenses both justice and forgiveness. In Christ alone are you set free. Look upon your natural slavery with a heavier sorrow than any slave looked upon his pitiable condition. Then, seek this freedom with all your might and trust that through this very news God will open your eyes to the Kingdom and King of this world and the next, even as he did that former slave from days long gone by who wrote,

Trying, however, as they were, and gloomy as was the prospect, thanks be to the Most High, who is ever the God of the oppressed, at the moment which was to determine my whole earthly career, His grace was sufficient; my mind was made up. I embraced the golden opportunity, took the morning tide at the flood, and a free man, young, active, and strong, is the result.³⁴

³⁴ "Letter To His Old Master," 422.