

By the Rivers of Babylon

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Bible Verse: Psalm 137
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We come back to the Psalms, Psalm 137 if you want to turn in your Bibles to Psalm 137. We're turning the corner, we're rounding third and coming toward home, you might say, in our eight year exposition of the entire psalter, and we come to one of the most stark Psalms, one of the most striking and almost disturbing Psalms upon a first read. As we read and study Psalm 137 together tonight, my notes are longer than usual for this one and so we'll see what the Lord has for us as the Spirit blesses his word to our hearts. But we are reading the word of God as we come together here today, and so we come to it with deference, we come to it with a teachable spirit and a receptive heart asking God to mold into us all that he would have for us from our study here this evening.

Let's read it together, Psalm 137 beginning in verse 1.

1 By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down and wept, When we remembered Zion. 2 Upon the willows in the midst of it We hung our harps. 3 For there our captors demanded of us songs, And our tormentors mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." 4 How can we sing the LORD'S song In a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, May my right hand forget her skill. 6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth If I do not remember you, If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy. 7 Remember, O LORD, against the sons of Edom The day of Jerusalem, Who said, "Raze it, raze it To its very foundation." 8 O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one, How blessed will be the one who repays you With the recompense with which you have repaid us. 9 How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones Against the rock.

That's a stark way for that Psalm to end, talking about dashing little children against the rock, and many commentators, I suppose understandably, shrink back from that language.

What we're going to do tonight as we read and study this Psalm, is we're going to spend a good bit of time setting the context of the Psalm so that we can understand it. Context is everything in biblical interpretation and no less is that so as we turn to Psalm 137. We're going to start here in verse 1, verse 1 you see the psalmist referring to Zion, and for those of you that are maybe new visiting us or only recently here, we've said many times that Zion is a poetic name for the city of Jerusalem and you can see that because Jerusalem

itself is mentioned so often in the remainder of the Psalm. Verse 5, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem." Verse 6, "If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy." Verse 7, "The day of Jerusalem." This Psalm has something to do with the city of Jerusalem which is somehow precious in the sight of the psalmist.

The city of Jerusalem, Zion, was special especially in Old Testament times, and if you think about it, you can see why that would be true. God chose Jerusalem to be his unique dwelling place. It was in Jerusalem where the temple was built. It was in the temple where God manifested his presence. It was in Jerusalem where the national feasts took place and the worship of the nation centered around the city. The religion centered around Jerusalem and the temple that was within it. And so for any pious Jew, for any loyal Jew, for any Jew with spiritual affections in the Old Testament, Jerusalem was special, Jerusalem was set apart as an object of their love and affection.

And you can see this in many many Psalms, and I'm just going to give you Psalm 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122. Those six Psalms in one way or another hail Zion as the city of God, hail it as a place to be revered and appreciated. For example, in Psalm 48:1-2 we read this, it says, "Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised, In the city of our God, His holy mountain. Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth, Is Mount Zion in the far north, The city of the great King." Exalted language rejoicing in what the city of Jerusalem represents. In Psalm 87 you read this, "The LORD loves the gates of Zion More than all the other dwelling places of Jacob. Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God." And so you see this great affection for the city. Pious Jews treasured Zion more than Americans treasure their landmarks, more than Americans might treasure Mount Rushmore, or the Capitol building, or the White House, or take any other landmark that you might think that is uniquely identified with the best things of America and then multiply it exponentially and you have something of a sense of what Jerusalem meant to the Jews and to this psalmist in particular.

So the city of Zion was special. It was a place where all spiritual affections were centered at the time that this Psalm was written, and so that is really important to understand. There is a visceral emotional connection to the city of Zion, maybe think about a husband who loves his wife and thinks that she's the best person that he's ever met in his life and he got to spend life with her, and he loves her and cherishes her and looks on her with affection and a beam comes in his eye when he thinks about his dear wife, or vice versa going from the wife to the husband. You need to think about Jerusalem in those kinds of contexts, with that kind of analogy to start to enter into the spirit of what lies behind this Psalm.

Now with that said, in the year 586 BC after centuries of rebellion by national Israel, the nation of Babylon came and destroyed the city of Jerusalem and carried most of the people off to exile. It was a judgment from God upon the sin of his people. 2 Chronicles is where I want you to turn, 2 Chronicles 36 to just get a historical narrative about the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. If you've read your Old Testament at all, you know that after the days of Joshua and the generation that survived them, what followed was the day of judges and there was just this downward cycle of spiritual sin and rebellion

against God that just continued for off and on, ups and downs, through the centuries. After the high point with David and Solomon, evil kings came, started to reign and there was this very bad decline that took place in the nation as they forfeited the spiritual privileges that were theirs and pursued idols and other things. You know, people do that, people forfeit, people walk away from spiritual privilege in ways that are sometimes difficult to understand. Well, that's what the nation of Israel had done and now we see the consequences, more specifically with the southern kingdom of Judah here in 586 BC, Scripture tells us, gives us a spiritual interpretation of what had happened.

We read this beginning in 2 Chronicles 36:15, "The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent word to them again and again by His messengers, because He had compassion on His people and on His dwelling place; but they continually mocked the messengers of God, despised His words and scoffed at His prophets, until the wrath of the LORD arose against His people, until there was no remedy." God, picture this because this is the pattern in spiritual life, God sent his messengers, he sent his prophets to the nations to warn them about the consequences of their sin, to call them to repentance, to plead with them to return to the God of their salvation, and what did they do? They publicly mocked them. They despised the word of God which came through his prophets. They scoffed at them until finally the wrath of the Lord arose against them.

There were consequences for their rebellion against the word of God and those who brought it to them so that in verse 17 we read this, "Therefore [God] brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans," which was kind of synonymous with the people of Babylon is an easy way to explain that for now. He brought up against them, brought up against the Jews, brought up against Judah the king of the Chaldeans "who slew their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary, and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or infirm; [God] gave them all into his hand. All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought them all to Babylon. Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its sabbaths. All the days of its desolation it kept sabbath until seventy years were complete."

So get the picture here. God appointed the city of Jerusalem to be the special manifestation of his presence. Pious Jews loved the city for that reason because they loved the God who had established it, and yet the nation over centuries sinned against God, rejected the word of God, mocked the messengers of the word of God until it was time and they were ripe for judgment. And what God did was is that he raised up the nation of the Chaldeans, the nation of the Babylonians, you read about this in Habakkuk, and brought down that nation upon them. He sent a nation to invade, conquer and destroy Jerusalem as judgment for their sin, and the people were carried off into exile. So this is just on a human level this is just tremendously tremendously sad to see the consequences

of sin, to see evil rebellious people rebelling against the word of God so much that judgment was necessary to bring upon them.

Here's what you need to understand for the context of Psalm 137: the nation as a whole deserved that judgment, otherwise God wouldn't have sent it. God is just and righteous in all of his ways and so we know by the fact that the judgment occurred that they deserved it, but understand this, that within the nation, within that nation being judged there was a remnant, there was a small portion of Jews who had remained faithful, who were spiritually minded, who loved Jerusalem, who loved God and who desired to serve him and be faithful to him and worshiped him out of a heart full of love and strength in their commitment to him. But here's the thing: that faithful remnant still felt the consequences of the sins of the majority. And this is what happens, you know, sin has a spillover effect and when parents sin, when parents reject the word of God, it has lifelong consequences upon their children. Some of you know that by sad personal experience, don't you? You know what it's like. Your life would have been so different if you had grown up under godly parents, or if you had grown up under parents that would have remained faithful to the Lord instead of abandoning him halfway through their lives or whatever the case may be. The consequences are felt by others who aren't necessarily guilty of the sins themselves, the consequences, not the guilt.

Well, that was the case here with the Jews. Beyond feeling the consequences of the sins of the majority and understanding the role of Jerusalem in the life of pious Jews, there's a second aspect of context that you need to understand to appreciate Psalm 137 and it's this, the Jews as they saw up close the horrors of ancient war, and what we're about to say, in my opinion, is critical to a right understanding of Psalm 137. In those days and probably in our day in the nation of Ukraine, it was common for invading armies to beat and kill the children of their defeated foes. This was common. This was the nature of warfare at that time. It does not matter what you and I think about the horrors of that, that's what the reality was and Scripture itself describes this in multiple places as being one of the ways that warfare was conducted at the time. So I'm not going to have you turn to these difficult books to find in your Bible, I'm just going to give you the verse references and you can look them up on your own. In the prophet Hosea 10:14 it says, "mothers were dashed in pieces with their children." In chapter 13, verse 16 of that same book we read this, "Samaria will be held guilty, For she has rebelled against her God. They will fall by the sword, Their little ones will be dashed in pieces, And their pregnant women will be ripped open." In Nahum 3:10, a prophecy about the fall of the city of Nineveh we read this, "Ethiopia was her might, And Egypt too, without limits. Put and Lubim were among her helpers. Yet she became an exile, She went into captivity; Also her small children were dashed to pieces At the head of every street." That's three passages in the Old Testament having nothing to do directly with Psalm 137 describing that ancient pattern of warfare in which children would be destroyed at the hands of a conquering army. This is just the way it was.

Now with that background, turn to the prophet Isaiah 13 and you read something that is prophetically significant that bears on Psalm 137. In Isaiah 13 you see a prophecy, we have a prophecy about Babylon which Isaiah the son of Amos saw, you read that in

chapter 13, verse 1. That's really important to understand. God is prophesying about Babylon and what would happen to Babylon in the future. Isaiah prophesied a couple of centuries probably before Psalm 137 was written. And we're not going to go through all of these verses here but we find this, God prophesying about his coming judgment on the people of Babylon in verse 16. This is what God said would happen to Babylon as a result of their own sin against him. He said this, "Their little ones also will be dashed to pieces Before their eyes; Their houses will be plundered And their wives ravished." Now God prophesied the destruction of Babylonian children long before it happened. It doesn't matter what you and I think about that, that's just the way it is, that's what God said. God is just and this is what God ordained as judgment upon the people of Babylon.

Now so let's just summarize the context then we'll get into the points that explain Psalm 137. Two things that I want you to understand. Pious Jews were passionate for Jerusalem. Jerusalem was everything to them the way that patriots used to love America and some still do, but even to a greater degree because it wasn't just a nation, this was their spiritual life. So pious Jews were passionate for the city of Jerusalem, now that's number 1. Secondly, ancient war was brutal on children. Passion for Jerusalem, brutality on children, that is the context, that is the background to Psalm 137 and that background is vital to a right view of Psalm 137.

So with that in mind, what we are going to do is we're going to look at three sections of the Psalm here tonight, turn back to Psalm 137 with me, and we're just going to walk through what this Psalm is all about. First of all, we're going to see the sorrow of his exile. The psalmist had been in exile, we're going to read, first of all, about the sorrow of his exile. This Psalm opens in a very sad lament. It just drips with tears right from the very beginning. There are tears streaming down the cheek as we open this Psalm.

Verse 1,

1 By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down and wept, When we remembered Zion. 2 Upon the willows in the midst of it We hung our harps.

Now Babylon was situated near two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates River, and they had also developed at that time, they had developed a system of canal irrigation in order to water their crops. So you had these great rivers, you had irrigation that was taking place. It was an alien environment compared to the dry climate of Judah's hills and valleys that the psalmist would have known and remembered. So the exile, then, was almost unbearable to these pious Jews who were living in Babylon. They had been removed from their homeland in order to live in a foreign land. The very topography was different than what they were used to. They were away from the temple. They were away from their homeland. They were away from everything that they had cherished and the homesick sorrow was crushing to them in that condition. They longed for home. You know, imagine us, it's impossible to really contemplate in a nation as large as ours, but imagine our nation being taken captive and we're taken off into exile someplace in the mountains by the Black Sea in Russia or in the lands of Russia. It's just impossible to

contemplate how difficult that would be. And so they're weeping as they remember their city. They want to be back there and they can't. They do not have autonomy in order to do that. They are under foreign oppression, they are under foreign obligation, and they are not free to do what they wanted to do and yet they remember the homeland and they weep in response to the memory.

Now in verse 2 you read, "Upon the willows in the midst of it We hung our harps." The willows refer to the trees that were native to the region, and as you know, the harps were the instruments of praise that the psalmists often used. Psalmists would often refer to the role of harps in their worship of Yahweh. Psalm 33:2, "Give thanks to the LORD with the lyre; Sing praises to Him with a harp of ten strings." Then Psalm 57:7-8 you read this, "My heart is steadfast, O God, my heart is steadfast; I will sing, yes, I will sing praises! Awake, my glory! Awake, harp and lyre! I will awaken the dawn." And so the harp was associated with their most precious and enthusiastic expressions of worship that they enjoyed in their homeland. Now they're away from their homeland, now they're in exile, now the judgment hand of God is upon them and you can almost picture the wistful scene as a skilled musician takes his harp and hangs it on a branch of a tree saying, "There's no worship here. There's no joy here. There's no use for this harp here." And he wipes the tears away from his eyes, turns away from the harp that previously had been his skillful expression of enthusiastic joyful worship to Yahweh. They are at rock bottom here.

So in Babylon the music goes silent. Instead of playing joyful music on their harps, they hung them on the trees and the strings were silent. Those of you that are musicians, those of you that have spent years developing your skill to be able to bring sweet music to those who hear you play can have a sense of how stark that must have been to walk away from your piano, to walk away from your trumpet, to walk away from your violin, that which you had poured your life into to master, now just walking away because the whole reason that you learned the skill had been taken away from you. That is the spiritual condition that the psalmist was facing.

Now as you read on, as we read on about the sorrow of this exile, we see this in verse 3, "We hung up our hearts," there at the end of verse 2, in verse 3 you read this,

3 For there our captors demanded of us songs, And our tormentors mirth,
saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

Picture what's going on. The Babylonian oppressors come to them perhaps taunting them, perhaps mocking them, you know, and saying, "Sing us one of the songs in which you celebrate your love for the city of Zion." Well, how grating could that have possibly been on a pious Jew who loved the city of Jerusalem? "You want me to sing my song of joy when I'm hundreds of miles away from the city? You want me to sing a song celebrating my city that you and your country, yourself destroyed? How can I sing like that? How can I express joy over Jerusalem when it lies in ruins and its walls are broken down?" And you pick up that theme in Nehemiah, the opening chapters of Nehemiah before he returned to rebuild the walls.

Beloved, speaking beloved here tonight, what you and I need to do rather than sitting in judgment of how this Psalm ends, our first responsibility is to enter into the mindset of the psalmist if we are going to understand it and not judge it based on, you know, modern conventions or what, you know, modern morality might seem. Our job is not that, not to sit in judgment of the psalmist but to come and sit down next to him as he weeps under the willow tree and enter into his suffering so that we understand what is being expressed here. That's the only responsible way to deal with this Psalm. And understand this as we sit down next to him under the shade of the willow tree in a foreign land far far from home, it was painful enough to be in exile in that foreign land but now their masters reminded them of their songs about the security of Zion and the wonder of Zion, and it makes a total mockery of what the Psalms celebrating Zion were meant to do. Those Psalms were written in order to think about the temple worship, in order to think about the God who had established it and the joy that we, speaking as a Jew, we are the people of God and we are in the city he has established for his own worship and his presence is manifested here. That's what those songs were for, celebrations of joy and gratitude and worship to the God who had so blessed his people to do that. And now in exile with the city broken down, they're supposed to sing the songs? It's a complete travesty. The thought is a travesty to think about.

It would be like doing this, think about the songs that couples choose to play at their wedding day and the joy and the love and the celebration and the sweetness of that day standing, making their vows and looking forward to a life full of joy together and just the richness of youthful love at the time, and flash forward a few years ahead and the husband has buried his wife and his heart is aching and grieving and mourning the loss of his beloved. Maybe she died before her time and he's left alone with his best friend gone and the companion of his youth and the bed is cold at night, and imagine how cruel it would be to go to that grieving widower and say, "Let's sing the song that you sang on your wedding day." That would be torture. The cruelty and the evil of that, to inflict on a grieving heart a song that would bring back memories of times that could not be recaptured. It's unthinkable and just the suggestion would be a mocker of the grief that that widower was going through at the time. That gives you a picture, that gives you something of the sympathy that should be evoked for the Jews that's describing this, demanding their songs of praise reinforced to them that they had lost the reason for their praise of the city of Zion.

The psalmist is recalling this as a recent event, perhaps upon his immediate return from the exile; this section reads as a past tense. But the mingled sorrow and irritation and cruelty of the suggestion that they sing was too much to bear. It was too much. If you want another picture to enter into the moment that he's describing, imagine this, imagine this, beloved, imagine telling a grieving mother who had just buried her beloved infant child, imagine going up and saying, "I want to hear you sing the lullaby that you used to sing when you put your child to sleep." It's cruel. It's vexatious. It's so profoundly irritating. It's so contrary to human kindness and so wicked and evil that the very thought of it is unthinkable, you know, the widower, the grieving mother. Well, that's what it was like for the grieving Jew who was no longer in the city of Zion.

So of course there's this sorrow and he describes this sorrow in such poignant terms in those opening three verses as we read about the sorrow of his exile. Well, as we move on beginning in verse 4 we see this second section of the Psalm, we see the defiance of his faith. The defiance of his faith. I don't get emotional in the pulpit. It's almost hard for me to control my own emotions at this point as you read on. You can imagine the hot tears that he felt when he spoke the words that follow in verse 4 and 5 and 6. He says,

4 How can we sing the LORD'S song In a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, May my right hand forget her skill. 6 May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth If I do not remember you, If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy.

A broken heart cannot sing with joy because there is no cause for joy, and a Jew forcibly removed from Zion cannot sing the songs which celebrate the joy of being there. So he says, "This is impossible. This is unthinkable. This would betray my loyalty to the city of Zion if I sang the song in a foreign land. How can I do that?" How can I sing the Star Spangled Banner when I've been captured and I am under foreign rule thousands of miles across an ocean in a different place? How can I do that? How can I act like it's the Fourth of July when I'm under foreign domination and I don't have my freedom anymore?

And so what you see in verses 5 and 6 is his utter defiance, the courage and the spirit that underlies verses 5 and 6 is an expression of a deep-rooted faith and a deep-rooted loyalty to Yahweh that is one of the most remarkable statements of faithfulness to God under torment that could possibly be imagined. In the face of a demand from his taskmaster saying, "Sing a song," he says, "I won't sing," and he says in verse 5, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, May my right hand forget her skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth If I do not remember you, If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy." These verses represent the threat of a self-curse. He pronounces a curse on himself if he forgets Jerusalem. For a musician, for a harpist to lose the ability of his right hand, for a vocalist to lose the ability of the tongue and the tongue to stick to the roof of the mouth would be the utter end of his talent. Everything that made him a special participant in worship would be gone if his right hand lost its skill, if his tongue lost the ability to sing. He wishes that loss upon himself if he forgets Jerusalem. In other words, what he is saying is, "My musical talents do not matter in and of themselves, they are not an end in themselves. I use my talent in order to praise God and I will not be joyful while I am separated from my home. I'm not here to perform on command. I perform out of a joyful vertical response to the God who saved me."

I have a friend who's a good vocalist and we talked about this one time, and he actually, he told me in circumstances far less grating than what we have here in Psalm 137, he made it plain to me, he won't sing on demand. He said, "You know, that's not why I sing. I sing for the Lord. I sing out of the joy of my heart but I'm not here to be hired by someone to just sing whatever they want, whenever they want me to." It doesn't work that way. His talents are set apart for the use in worship to God, not simply to please the carnal desires of unsanctified men. I respect him for that.

This is something of what the psalmist is saying, "No, no, my talent isn't available for your amusement and to mock me with. I won't sing." And that combination of defiance toward his captors and loyalty to God in the city of Jerusalem lead to the climax of the Psalm as we look at point number 3: the curse on his enemies. The curse on his enemies. He forcibly rejects compliance with the demand. His loyalty to his homeland is fierce and understand, I'll say it again, understand that this is the fruit of faith. You know, James says that faith without works is dead. This is the works of true faith in exile and his loyalty to the homeland is supreme. He's offended by his captors. He's sorrowing over exile as he says these things in verse 7. We'll read verses 7 through 9.

7 Remember, O LORD, against the sons of Edom The day of Jerusalem,
Who said, "Raze it, raze it To its very foundation." 8 O daughter of
Babylon, you devastated one, How blessed will be the one who repays you
With the recompense with which you have repaid us. 9 How blessed will
be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones Against the rock.

Now the sons of Edom described there in verse 7, they were the descendants of Jacob's son Esau. They were distant relatives to the Jews but on the day that Jerusalem fell, they were supporting the invaders, they weren't coming to the support of their kinsmen. Obadiah prophesied against Edom on this particular ground and because they supported the Babylonians against the children of Israel, the psalmist asks God to remember them and to judge them for it, and we see here a very fine example of the purposes of God and God bringing judgment upon his people but that does not give liberty to the enemies of Israel to rejoice over it. They are sinning in their rejoicing over it. They're rejoicing over the hardship and sorrow being afflicted upon the Jews and that was sinful, that was wrong. There should have been sympathy for their kinsmen but they had none of that. So the psalmist says, "God, remember what happened when Jerusalem fell. Remember how these Edomites supported and rejoiced in our sorrow." Scripture speaks about that, you know, don't rejoice in the calamity of your enemy. And so the psalmist asks God to judge Edom for joining against Israel which is the very thing that Obadiah himself prophesied that Edom would suffer.

So there in verse 7 he deals with the secondary matter of the Edomites, and then he turns his attention to his Babylonian captors and his words there in those final two verses express his longing for the righteous judgment and the vindication by God to take place, and it is so important for us to think our way carefully through this. He says there in verse 8, "How blessed will be the one who repays you. How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones Against the rock." But understand this, beloved, keep this in mind here, remember how this section opened. There in verse 7 he says, "Remember, O LORD, against the sons of Edom." The context is him calling upon God. The context is him calling on God for God to be faithful to his own word. So, yes, in these last two verses he states a curse on Babylon by pronouncing blessing on the one who would execute judgment on them in the future, but what he is calling for, what he is rehearsing, what he is finding refuge in his heart is this: he is not rejoicing, he is not luxuriating in his own hatred and his own feelings of animosity; that is not what he is doing here, rather he is taking comfort in the fact that God himself had said he would do this. He is resting in

the future final judgment of God upon Babylon rather than expressing any hatred in his own heart. And he is saying, notice how he says in verse 8 that Babylon, they themselves had done this to the Jews.

There was a context to what he's saying in these last two verses. He says, "O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one," devastated because judgment would come upon them soon enough. He says, "How blessed will be the one who repays you With the recompense with which you have repaid us." He's simply articulating the biblical principle of an eye for an eye. Babylon had done this to the Jews and the psalmist longs for God to bring justice upon them in like manner. And before your heart is even tempted to criticize the psalmist for expressing such thoughts, you must remember this: we saw earlier in Isaiah 13:16 that God himself had said that he would bring that kind of judgment on Babylon. God in his righteousness said that he would repay those who had sinned. God in his righteousness, in his holiness, said that he himself would do this. Beloved, as violent as the words may sound to our ears today, the psalmist is only doing this, he is only appealing to God to do what God had previously said that God himself would do. He's not making this up out of the wretchedness of his own heart. He knows Scripture well enough to say, "God, You had said that You would do this and I am looking forward to the time where Your justice is displayed."

You know, in our day in the so-called Evangelical church, we have heard thousands of messages collectively if we added them all together, even in a room of this size it might be tens of thousands of messages on the love and grace and mercy of God, and thank God that he's a God of love, mercy and grace because without that none of us would be saved. Thank God for that but the problem is, the problem especially in our day is that people don't want the parallel truth of the justice and holiness and righteousness and judgment of God. If we're going to love God truly, we're going to love him for all of his perfections, not just the ones that appeal to us, not just the ones that comfort us, but we're going to embrace the ones also that display his holiness and his justice because if God is not holy and God is not just, then he's not God at all.

So what the psalmist is doing here is he is looking forward to the promised deliverance of God, not rejoicing in the hatred of his own heart. He's rejoicing in the fact that God is holy, God is just, these people exceeded the bounds that God had established for them, they had inflicted untold hardship upon the people of the Jews and rejoiced while they were doing it, and he's longing for God to reverse it and to bring justice back to bear. What would be our hope if there was no justice of God? Is evil, let's put the question this way as we think about this Psalm. Are we supposed to not want the justice of God? Are we supposed to just turn our backs as evil proliferates? As wicked people flourish? As God's design for marriage and sexuality is just trampled upon in our day? Are we supposed to just turn our backs and not want justice and some kind of vindication for the blood of some 65 million babies that have been aborted since Roe v Wade? Are we supposed to just be indifferent to that and just think about the grace of God or is there some place for justice to be brought down upon evil men and the evil acts that they've done? The psalmist doesn't take vengeance into his own hands here. All he's doing at the end of Psalm 137, he is aligning himself with the previously expressed purpose of God.

God had said he would do this and the psalmist simply looks at the evil people and says, "It's going to be such a wonderful day when God brings forth the judgment on you that He Himself said that He would do."

You know, beloved, this isn't simply an Old Testament thing. Even the New Testament has the spirit of God's vengeance. Jesus pronounced all kinds of curses on the Pharisees in Matthew 23, "Woe to you Pharisees. Woe to you Pharisees. Woe to you Pharisees." I think it's a half-dozen times he pronounces judgment upon them. The Apostle Paul pronounced a curse on those who preach a different gospel. In the book of Galatians 1:8 and 9, "If any man preaches a different gospel than what you received from us, even if it's an angel from heaven, let him be accursed!" At the end of 1 Corinthians, "If any man doesn't love the Lord, let him be accursed." Beloved, what is hell, what is hell except God's eternal curse on rebels against his will? You see, you can't, you really can't take up arms against verse 9 without quickly setting yourself in opposition to the God of justice, the God of holiness, the God of eternal vengeance against the rebels against him.

Beloved, you and I, we have to look beyond this widespread ancient practice of killing children in war that is alluded to here in verse 9, we have to look past that and see the justice of God as he accomplishes his purpose. And as you and I look upon the justice of God, we should quickly turn our eyes to Calvary where God poured out his justice on his own Son, our blessed Lord Jesus, judged his Son for the sins of his people, that Christ who was God himself in human flesh bore the curse on our behalf in order that we might be saved, and in Christ the justice and mercy of God met, the love and holiness of God met in the person of Christ as he bore our sins in his body on the cross so that everyone who believes in him might be saved. Dead, buried, resurrected, ascended, interceding for his saints, one day coming again. Know, beloved, know to object to the justice of God is to undo biblical salvation.

So we come to see that the nature of God's judgment reveals the nature of his holiness. God is so holy and God so hates sin that it must be judged, and as we remember the justice of God, we remember the greater curse that Christ bore on our behalf.

Turn with me to the book of Galatians 3 just after the Corinthian epistles. Galatians 3, we read this in verse 10, "For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them.'" That book is describing each and every one of us because every one of us has failed to abide by all things that are written in the book of the law. Verse 11, "Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, 'The righteous man shall live by his faith.'" None of us have done what God requires. None of us will be justified in our own righteousness. Rather righteousness comes by faith in Christ alone. We read this, verse 12, "However, the Law is not of faith; on the contrary, 'He who practices them shall live by them.'" And then we see this in verse 13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

We should not tone down Psalm 137 to satisfy modern-day critics. Instead we should see the principle of God's justice and then thank him that he has made a way of escape for us through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. If you are not in Christ, I call upon you to see the terrible justice of God, the fearsome holiness of God, and to repent and turn to Christ before that final day of judgment comes.

Let's pray together.

Father, we see Your holiness and justice and we fear. We see the cross of Jesus Christ and we adore. Father, we honor You and we pray that hearts might be drawn to Christ through the contemplation of the fearsome judgment of God and we pray, Father, that You would give us strength to demonstrate the faithfulness and fidelity to You that the psalmist did in his day, to him to forget Jerusalem he would rather forget his skill than forget Jerusalem. For us, Father, may it be true in our hearts that we would rather forget our skill than for a moment betray loyalty and fidelity to the Lord Jesus Christ. O Christ, You loved us, You gave Yourself up for us, we pray now that that would motivate us to love You more for we have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer we who live but Christ lives in us, and the life which we as Christians now live in the flesh we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave Himself up for us. All praise be to Christ and to the great Triune God. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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