

LIVING IN EXILE – (SUNDAY, MAY 21, 2006)

Scripture reading – **I Peter 4:12-19; Psalm 137**

INTRODUCTION

Last week we considered the sad story of the fall of Judah, the destruction of the temple, and the Babylonian exile. The exile we noted took place in four steps. First, in 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar carried away members of the royal family and nobility including Daniel. Another eight years later, in 597 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar took into captivity a much larger number of men and women, generally the upper class of the society, which included craftsmen, artisans, and military personnel. The total number taken at this time is difficult to determine, but it was at least 10,000. The prophet Ezekiel was part of this number. After the final siege and destruction of Jerusalem, eleven years later, in 586 B.C., another 832 were taken away. And finally, five years later, in 581 B.C., another 745 were taken away. The total number taken into captivity is not easily determined from either from Scripture or from history. One Bible scholar has estimated that the total number taken away could have been as high as 62-70 thousand.¹

The fall of Judah and Jerusalem occurred exactly as the Babylonian empire ascended into becoming the most powerful empire of the day. The city of Babylon dates all the way back to the time of Abraham.² With the fall of Nineveh in 606 B.C., the city of Babylon became the capital of the Babylonian empire. And through the efforts of King Nebuchadnezzar it

¹ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, article on the captivity, accessed from www.studydrive.org.

² Easton's Bible Encyclopedia.

became one of the most splendid cities in the entire ancient world. The Greek historian Herodotus claimed the outer walls of Babylon were 56 miles in length, 80 feet thick, and 320 feet high. While modern archaeology has shown this assessment to not be very accurate, giving an estimate for the city walls of being only 10 miles in length and not nearly as high, the city was still incredibly impressive.³ Historical and archaeological accounts of the famous Hanging Gardens of Babylon are also not in agreement with each other, but there is no doubt that these gardens would have been an amazing sight – “a green, leafy, artificial mountain rising off the plain.”⁴

While Daniel and some of the other captives were most likely settled in the city of Babylon, many of the other captives were settled in other regions. In Ezekiel 3:15, the prophet records that he came to the captives at Tel Abib, who dwelt by the River Chebar. For seven days he remained there astonished among them. While this location is not known exactly, it is thought that this site was located about 50 miles southeast of Babylon or about 100 miles from the city of Baghdad. Ezra 2:59 lists another 5 cities or areas where the captives were taken.

Before we look at Psalm 137, I would like us to consider one other passage of Scripture, Jeremiah 29. Turn there please.

The first 3 verses of chapter 29 note that Jeremiah sent this letter from Jerusalem to those who were carried away captive. The actual letter begins, then, in verse 4:

³ Taken from www.unmuseum.org

⁴ *ibid.*

⁴ Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all who were carried away captive, whom I have caused to be carried away from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵ Build houses and dwell in them; plant gardens and eat their fruit. ⁶ Take wives and beget sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, so that they may bear sons and daughters--that you may be increased there, and not diminished. ⁷ And seek the peace of the city where I have caused you to be carried away captive, and pray to the LORD for it; for in its peace you will have peace.

⁸ For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are in your midst deceive you, nor listen to your dreams which you cause to be dreamed. ⁹ For they prophesy falsely to you in My name; I have not sent them, says the LORD. ¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. ¹¹ For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.

God's people then were then given two major instructions. You might call this the test of the exile. First, make the best of the time in captivity. Live as best you can, as you would normally live. But second, they were to remember and be encouraged with the hope that they would return. Three times in verses 10-14 this is emphasized. And while this seems like something that God's people would have naturally desired, in actuality most of God's people

who were carried away never returned because of their failure to obey the words of the Lord. According to one estimate, only 1/7 of those living in exile made the effort to return to Israel after the captivity was over.⁵ Here is another example of God's people failing the test. This background then sets the context for Psalm 137.

Psalm 137 is considered one of the 6 Psalms generally classified as imprecatory, that is those Psalms containing curses. On the surface the Psalm stands out especially in comparison to the Psalms which surround it, for example, Psalm 136, which sings of God's mercy which endures forever, and the well known Psalm 139. But I hope that after I finish the exposition of this passage, that you will see how this Psalm should not really stand out, and that it should be read and used as much as the other Psalms which are generally thought to be more happy, kind, or gentle.

The Psalm can be divided into a four-part chiasmic structure:

v. 1-4: The Lament of Present Sorrow and Judgment

v. 5-6: The Vow to Remember

v. 7: A Call for God to Remember

v. 8-9: The Terror and Future Blessing of Judgment

PSALM 137:1-4 – THE LAMENT OF PRESENT SORROW AND JUDGMENT

The Psalms were written not only to encourage us in our praise of God, but they also are a call for faith, trust, hope, and obedience. They call us to identify with the author and the situation. This particular Psalm then is a call

⁵ Easton's Bible Encyclopedia, Captivity.

for us to consider ourselves as part of the exiled people of God now 800 miles from their beloved homeland, cut off from the worship and presence of God experienced at the temple. This Psalm was written probably, shortly after the exile period⁶, but it is a record of the deep longings and desires of those who were faithful to God in Babylon and a call for God's people after the exile to also remember and experience the same longings and desires. Even today it calls for God's people to express the same sorrow, longing, and faith.

The letter that Jeremiah wrote to the captives gives us an indication that although the captivity was not pleasant, it was also not a completely unbearable condition. They were not placed under the condition slavery like they were in Egypt. Verse 1 notes the immediate context of this Psalm, by the rivers of Babylon. In a dry and hot place, being by a river would be a blessing. Even in the midst of judgment God does care for His people. And yet properly, this Psalm expresses the sorrow of God's people even though conditions could have been worse. It was specifically when they remembered Zion that they wept. Zion was one of the hills of Jerusalem, but here it used as a word representing Jerusalem and the worship of God's people at the tabernacle or temple. Psalm 84 is one of the great songs of Zion that express the longing of God's people to be in Zion. "For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere."

Verse 2-4 further describes the sorrow of God's faithful people in Babylon. Music and the playing of harps were a central part of the life of God's people. But now instead of playing their harps, they hung them harps on the trees

⁶ Boice, Commentary on Psalm 137, p. 1187.

which lined the rivers of Babylon. Singing was also a central part of the life of God's people. The book of Ezra in chapter 2 notes that in the return to Jerusalem were 200 male and female singers. The book of 2 Chronicles describes an interesting battle where as the central part of the battle plan, King Jehosaphat appointed a choir to go out before the army to sing praise to the LORD. While the choir sang, the LORD went out to battle causing the enemies of Judah to kill each other. For three days they carried away the spoil. Over seventy times the Psalms speaking of singing, and only in this chapter is there a refusal to sing.

Verse 4, I don't believe, is an indication that God's people stopped their singing for their entire captivity, but rather they would not sing at the request of their captors and tormenters and that they could not sing in a foreign land as if they were in Israel.

Application: The first portion of this Psalm is also a call that we also practice what we might call the discipline of godly sorrow. In today's world where there are so many distractions and things that call for our attention, we must be very careful that we do not lose the discipline of godly sorrow.

First, Scripture would call us first to show true sorrow for our sins. Psalm 51:17, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart--These, O God, You will not despise." The joy of forgiveness is only truly known when we demonstrate true sorrow for our sins.

But, second, our sorrow should not just be self-directed. Romans 12:15 calls us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. The reason that Paul needed to give this as a command was because this type of a

response does not come naturally. In fact, sometimes we do just the opposite. We rejoice when others are weeping, and we weep when others are rejoicing. Hebrews 13:3, commands that we “Remember the prisoners as if chained with them--those who are mistreated--since you yourselves are in the body also.”

Third, it is good that have sorrow over the state of rebellion in our nation. Proverbs 14:34, “Righteousness exalts a nation, But sin is a reproach to any people.” Psalm 119:136, “Rivers of water run down from my eyes, Because men do not keep Your law.”

And fourth, we sorrow over the state of the church in our own nation and in many places in the world. Charles Spurgeon wrote, “Even thus do true believers mourn when they see the church despoiled and find themselves unable to succor her; we could bear anything better than this. In these our times the Babylon of error ravages the city of God, and the hearts of the faithful are grievously wounded as they see truth fallen in the streets and unbelief rampant among the professed servants of the Lord.”

PSALM 137:5-6 – THE VOW TO REMEMBER

Godly sorrow does not mean that hope is lost. The second section of this Psalm is an expression of hope in God’s promises in the form of a vow or oath.

⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget its skill! ⁶ If I do not remember you, Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth--If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy.

The words of the vow are based on the first verses of the Psalm. The words, right hand, mean the hand of strength and skill, the hand used for playing the harp. Likewise the tongue refers to the songs, which were now not being sung.⁷ It is important to note that there is a change in the personal pronoun, from we to I. Each one of God's people was called to take this same vow before God. The vow represents both an expression of hope and a commitment to action. Though the harps were not being played right now, they would be played again. And though the songs were now silent, they too would be sung again. And of all God's people were then called to live remembering that a return to the land would occur and that when the time came, that they would then be willing to give up everything that had been gained in Babylon and return to Jerusalem.

Archaeologists have found cuneiform tablets from the city of Nippur, thought to be close to the river Chebar, mentioned in the writings of Ezekiel. These records reveal that at least some of the Jewish people did quite well in their business activities.⁸ And perhaps this is part of the reason why seemingly such a small percentage of Jews living in the kingdom of Babylon ended up returning to Israel after the captivity. They did not remember, but forgot Jerusalem.

The apostle Paul in Philippians 3:17-21, wrote:

¹⁷ Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern. ¹⁸ For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: ¹⁹

⁷ Ibid, p. 1189.

⁸ International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, article on the captivity, accessed from www.studylight.org.

whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame--who set their mind on earthly things.

²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.

How careful then we must be that we also do not grow so comfortable in our living that we forget or neglect the reason why God has placed on earth. Yes, it is good and proper that we follow the words of Jeremiah to the captives, to build houses and dwell in them, to plant gardens, to take wives and have children, and see to it that our children do the same. We are called even to seek the peace of the place where we live. But we must do all of this remembering ultimately that our citizenship is in heaven. We must be very careful that in our prosperity and ease we never become irrelevant as a church and as families. “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”

PSALM 137:7 – A CALL FOR GOD TO REMEMBER

Verses 7-9 repeat the first two themes of the Psalm but now in an opposite pattern. Verse 7 is now a call for God to remember. And verses 8-9 contrast the sorrow of the first four verses in speaking of the happiness that will come when Babylon is judged.

The word remember is an important covenantal term, meaning it calls for both God and man to consider the promises that have been made and the duties that are then required.

Genesis 8:1 – And God remembered Noah.

Genesis 19:29 – God remembered Abraham.

Genesis 30:22 – God remembered Rachel

Exodus 2:24 – God remembered His covenant with Abraham

Judges 8:34 – And the children of Israel remembered not the LORD their God.

And three times we find the expression, Remember, O LORD, used in the OT, calling for God to either bless or judge in terms of His covenant promises.

The book of Obadiah provides the historical background for verse 7 along with the prophetic judgment that would befall Edom for her part in the destruction of Jerusalem.

¹⁰ “For violence against your brother Jacob, Shame shall cover you, And you shall be cut off forever.

¹¹ In the day that you stood on the other side--In the day that strangers carried captive his forces, When foreigners entered his gates And cast lots for Jerusalem--Even you were as one of them.

¹² But you should not have gazed on the day of your brother In the day of his captivity; Nor should you have rejoiced over the children of Judah In the day of their destruction; Nor should you have spoken proudly In the day of distress.

¹³ You should not have entered the gate of My people In the day of their calamity. Indeed, you should not have gazed on their affliction In the day of their calamity, Nor laid hands on their substance In the day of their calamity.

¹⁴ You should not have stood at the crossroads To cut off those among them who escaped; Nor should you have delivered up those among them who remained In the day of distress.

God's covenant people then were to pray in terms of this prophetic word against Edom. The faithful in Israel were not to take matters into their own hands, but were rather to wait for God to remember what had been done and then to bring judgment.

PSALM 137:8-9 – THE TERROR AND FUTURE BLESSING OF JUDGMENT

⁸ O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed, Happy the one who repays you as you have served us! ⁹ Happy the one who takes and dashes Your little ones against the rock!

Most Christians and non-Christians probably can understand the call for justice in verse 7, but now these final words of this Psalm seem also too shocking to consider or even apply. Charles Spurgeon in response to those who would have been offended by its language wrote:

“Let those find fault with it who have never seen their temple burned, their city ruined, their wives ravished, and their children slain; they might not perhaps be so velvet-mouthed if they had suffered after this fashion. It is one thing to talk of the bitter feeling which moved captive Israelites in Babylon, and quite another thing to be captives ourselves under a strange and remorseless power, which knew not how to show mercy, but delighted in barbarities to the defenseless. Psalm 137 is a fruit of the Captivity in Babylon, and often has it furnished expression for sorrows which had else had been unutterable.”

The response of Spurgeon is right on, but let me give a few additional words of both explanation and then application.

First, note the words, daughter of Babylon. This expression is used 5 times in the OT and they are used always in the context of the judgment that would befall the mighty empire of Babylon. For a time this mighty empire was used

by God even as Daniel predicted in his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the statute. But eventually God's use of this mighty empire was finished, and her sure destruction was predicted numerous times by the prophets.

Second, the word translated happy is used 26 times in the book of Psalms, and is often translated as blessed, for example in Psalm 1. Those who fulfill God's Word are those who are considered blessed in that they are accomplishing the will of God. King Cyrus who would eventually break the power of Babylon, is the blessed or happy one of this passage, because he was used to accomplish the will of God. Though Cyrus himself was not a follower of God, He was used by God in a mighty way, in bringing to an end the power of Babylon and then in allowing God's people to return to Jerusalem.

Third, the words of verse 9, are a summary of the terror of judgment that God does bring and not merely a sadistic wish. In explaining this, let me make three points. First, Verse 9 is really a summary of Jeremiah 50-51, two long chapters prophesying in full the judgment that would eventually come upon Babylon. For example, the word "dashes" is used 9 times in Jeremiah 51. Second, the word translated as little ones, is also found 20 times in the OT, 9 times in the plural and 11 times in the singular. And in just about every case, the word occurs in the context of judgment unlike the other words which can also be translated as child. Third, the word translated in the NKJV as rock and in the KJV as stones is a word that generally means cliff. Since Babylon is not a mountainous region, some have suggested that the expression is metaphorical. There are no cliffs in Babylon where this could be

literally fulfilled. All of this does not make the verse any less shocking, but I would characterize verse 9 as being a specific example of judgment language. And when God does judge, it is a terrible and horrific thing. God's judgments often bring death for both young and old alike.

I mentioned earlier that Psalm 137 almost seems out of place in the midst of a large section of Psalms of praise. But in reality this Psalm is as much as Psalm of praise as are the other Psalms, though the language on the surface seems much darker. For Psalm 137 is a Psalm that celebrates God's judgment, deliverance, and justice. There are those who would like to say that this Psalm is only for the old covenant era, but that would be in error, for when we pray the Lord's Prayer and pray for God's Kingdom to come, we are praying for God to judge His enemies. Revelation 18 and 19 also present a picture of the destruction of Babylon in which God's people are commanded to rejoice and give glory to God.

APPLICATION AND CONCLUSION

If there ever was a time when the spirit of Psalm 137 needs to be recovered it is today, for we must recognize the type of exile that the church in America and in much of the world is experiencing. The Church in America has largely grown content with Babylon. We like all the things that it provides for us. And lest we become hypocrites, we must recognize our own part in this. May this Psalm then be a reminder of the sorrow that we should have, the commitment that we must demonstrate, and the prayers that must be prayed.

CLOSING HYMN: PSALMS FOR SINGING 137

BENEDICTION – JUDE 24-25

Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling,

And to present you faultless

Before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy,

To God our Savior, Who alone is wise,

Be glory and majesty, Dominion and power, Both now and forever.

Amen.