

By the Rivers of Babylon
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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Rev. Peter Jonker
Psalm 137

Before I read this Psalm, let me give you the setting. This song was written by an exile. It was written by someone who has been taken away from his home in Jerusalem by the Babylonian army, and taken off to Babylon as a slave. It's possible that this person was some sort of temple musician, someone who played hymns and songs in the temple – hopefully you'll hear why I say that as I read. So now, as I read, imagine a person who has been away from his home for 20 years already, a person who has fond memories of his hometown, but who also has horrific memories of the destruction that brought him here. Maybe – and here I'm imagining - after a long day of making music for his enemy captors he sits in his room with his harp on his lap, he thinks of his homeland and he writes this song. Read Psalm 137.

The end of this Psalm sort of knocks the wind out of you, doesn't it? The image of the enemy's children smashing against the rocks is so shocking, you are left momentarily stunned. How can this be? This Psalmist blessing those who massacre children! This Psalmist is advocating infanticide! In our modern way of thinking, people who murder enemy children are war criminals, but here they are called blessed. Verse 9 is a gut punch, and frankly, for modern readers, it overshadows everything else in the Psalm. The violence of that last verse eclipses the previous 8 verses.

I acknowledge the horror of that last verse and I promise I will deal with it in this sermon. But I want to turn your mind away from verse 9 for a few minutes, because that's not what this Psalm is about. This Psalm is not about smashing children against the rocks. It is about something more important. This Psalm is about remembering. This Psalm is calling God's people to remember. Our friend sitting in his room writing this angry song is worried that people will forget who they are.

As our Psalmist sits in his room remembering Jerusalem, he is deeply aware of the temptation to forget. He knows his people are tempted to forget Jerusalem and all it stood for, and to simply adopt the Babylonian ways and the Babylonian gods and the Babylonian values. You have to imagine that after 20 or thirty years in captivity, there is a whole generation of young people who grew up in Babylon and have no firsthand memory of Jerusalem. Maybe this Psalmist even has a child from that generation. She's 17 years old. She speaks Hebrew, but it's not her first language. Mostly when she and her friends get together they speak the Babylonian language; they rattle on freely in this new tongue and they laugh and joke while he struggles to keep up. His daughter dresses like a Babylonian. She goes to parties on the Babylonian holidays. She hums Babylonian songs when she does her household chores. It's like she's a completely different person. The fact was many of his fellow Jews were taking

Babylonian names and worshiping the Babylonian gods. Had they forgotten Jerusalem!? Had they forgotten the horrible day when his people had been conquered? Had they forgotten the dead women and children who filled up the streets of the holy city? Had they forgotten that they were the chosen people of the Lord!?! Now it seemed as if the only time their old land came to mind was when he was on a job, playing music at a party, and some tipsy Babylonian would say to him, “Hey Jew, your people like to sing don’t they? I love your music! It’s so quaint. Why don’t you sing us one of them there Zion songs.” It made him seethe.

Forgetting is always a danger for exiles, when people are far from home strange things happen: They forget their true purpose, they forget their real name, they stop trying to make things right and they just try to get along.

In 1980 there was a hostage crisis in Iran. After the Iranian revolution, 50 hostages were taken in the American embassy by a group of militant students. 50 Americans suddenly became exiles. A few years back Mark Bowden wrote about the incident in *The Atlantic* magazine. He observed how differently the hostages reacted to their captivity. After only 8 weeks some of them became sympathetic with the men threatening to kill them. After only 8 weeks some of them were cooperating with their captors. A couple of them were even ready to publicly read statements defending their oppressors. In return for their cooperation and sympathy these cooperative captives received better food, better living conditions, better clothes – life was easier for them. Why did these hostages behave that way? They just wanted to get along. They stopped worrying about who they were and what was right, and they did whatever it took to have a nice day. You could say that these captives chose to forget who they were.

And, of course, this is exactly where the scenario in Babylon is relevant to our situation as Christians today. Our life is not exactly like Judah’s captivity in Babylon, but there are overlaps. We have been called to be God’s distinct people in this world. We are citizens of God’s kingdom, and we have a different king. We measure our life by the life of Jesus. The Spirit’s fruit is growing in our hearts. Our lives are meant to be a witness to the gospel. But it’s easy to forget who we are. It’s easy to forget that mission. It’s easy to start cooperating with the powers instead of confronting them. And the rewards for cooperation are substantial. Like the cooperative captives in Iran, if you don’t make a stink, if you are a good cheerful citizen, if you smile and don’t ask questions, if you make the necessary compromises, there will be perks, promotions. Your bed will be warm and your stomach will be full.

This Psalm will not let us ‘just get along.’ This Psalm will not let us forget who we are and what we’re about in this world. “If I ever forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!” The Psalmist wants us to remember that our highest joy is not a full stomach and a warm bed and a secure family; our highest joy is Jerusalem. The

Psalmist wants God's people to remember and to stay angry so that they won't forget who they are.

So one of the things this jarring Psalm can still teach us is this: As faithful Christians, we ought to be dissatisfied in this world, we ought to be a little restless, a little out of place. We should always have some frustration and even a little anger. If we are never upset in this world, it's probably a sign that we've become complacent. You see, anger is a proper response to injustice. Anger is what we feel when we think a wrong is being done to us, or to others. If you don't ever feel any anger it's a sign that either you no longer recognize when something's wrong in your life and in the world; OR it's a sign that you recognize it, but just don't care that much. Psalm 137 is saying, remember God's path, remember God's ways, remember God's justice so that when you see evil you will be upset, and you will act.

Can anger go too far? Of course it can. Here is where we come back to verse 9 and the children: I think that dashing enemy children against the rocks is too much. It is important to remember the call of God, it is important to remember justice and righteousness, but there is a way of remembering that leads to hate and violence. At the battle of wounded knee 300 Sioux Indians, men women and children – were gunned down by US cavalymen using primitive machine guns, a terrible, unjust, hateful act. This slaughter was driven at least partly by inappropriate remembering. As the soldiers shot down the Sioux they were reported to have shouted "Remember Custer!" and "Remember the Little Bighorn." Their angry memory of that past defeat led them to kill Sioux children.

There is a way of remembering that leads to an anger that is toxic. To remember an offense that someone has committed against you, to fanatically record every wrong committed against you, to fantasize about getting even – that is not the way of Jesus. I can understand why the Psalmist feels this way, but as a Christian I cannot pray what he prays. I cannot sing his song. There is a destructive kind of remembering that nurses violence and hate.

But now, while I don't think verse 9 is appropriate for a Christian, I want you to see that this awful verse is already leading us in a different direction from hatred and revenge. Look at verse 7. Who does the Psalmist call upon to remember the atrocities of the Babylonians? Does he call upon himself to remember? Does he call upon God's people to remember? No, in verse 7 he asks God to remember. "Remember O Lord" he says. The language of the Psalm expresses too much hate, but at least the Psalmist puts his hate and his rage into the hands of God.

And God does remember. He hears our cries. He does not forget the evils and injustices committed in this world. None of the terrible things we do to each other are hidden from his sight. What does God do in response to all these injustices? When horrors like this are brought to his attention, what does he do with these memories? He sends his Son to earth. And, as we said, Jesus is angry with what he sees; he's furious. But he doesn't take children and dash them against a rock; he takes them upon his knee. And he doesn't smash all the evil

sinner to tiny bits; he gives his life for them. He doesn't break the enemies to bits, he lets himself be broken. It's fair to say that Jesus, God's child, the Father's only begotten son, lets himself be smashed against the rocks of our sin and shame and guilt and hate.

When we see how Jesus does with all our sins, we can't pray verse 9 anymore. In Christ's death and resurrection violent revenge fantasies finally come to an end. Not that we never get angry anymore. We still have holy anger, only now that anger gets expressed through sacrifice and witness. Like Jesus we are angry, we are passionate. Like Jesus our anger leads us to pursue justice. But now we process that anger by picking up our own cross and following him. Our passion for justice may still lead to bloodshed, only now the blood you shed in the service of the kingdom could well be your own.

Last week I heard a story about this on the NPR show *This American Life*. A Father was telling the story of the Christmas that he told his daughter about Jesus. She was 4, and the family celebrated Christmas, and for the first time she asked her Dad, "What's Christmas about Dad?" Her dad explained to her that we celebrate this day because it is when Jesus was born and he told his daughter a little about who Jesus was and what he did. She was thrilled and wanted to hear more about his Jesus and so the dad went to a library and took out Bible story books and they heard about his miracles and his teachings. The father explained Jesus to his little girl by saying that Jesus taught that you should 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' A couple of weeks later they were driving by a catholic church and in the front of the church there was a crucifix – Jesus hanging on the cross. "Who's that!?" asked the girl wide eyed. The father had forgotten to tell her the end of the story. "Oh, that's Jesus," said Dad, "What he taught and what he said was so radical, so unnerving that the people in power thought they had to kill him, so they did. They killed him by putting him on a cross." The little girl thought about that for a while.

A few weeks later, in January it's Martin Luther King Day and since she has the day off from school, Dad decides to take his little girl out for lunch. At lunch there's a newspaper lying there and on the cover of the newspaper is a big picture of Martin Luther King. "Who's that!?" asked the girl. "Oh!" said dad, "That is Martin Luther King and as a matter of fact, he's the reason you have school off today. We're celebrating his birth." "What did He do?" she asked. "He was a preacher" said Dad. "For Jesus!?!?" Her ears perked up. "Yeah as a matter of fact he *was* a preacher for Jesus." "What did he say dad." "Well he told people that we should treat everyone the same no matter what they looked like." The little girl thought for a minute and she said, "That's the same as Jesus." "Yeah I guess it is!" said Dad. The girl thought for another minute or so and then she said, "Did they kill him too?"

May Psalm 137 keep our memory alive. May it awake our passion. May it arouse a holy anger that leads us to seek righteousness in this world. May it cause us to pick up our cross every day and follow him.

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