

Desiring God

Psalm 137

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Jesus and his apostles every now and then spoke of people who are truly blessed. Blessed are... please help me... Blessed are who?

Answers could be: peacemakers, the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful.

But the Psalm we read today says, 'blessed shall he be who smashes the children of Babylon against a rock'. Oops.

In their pop-song, Boney M sang this Psalm, but they replaced the part of smashing the children against a rock with the prayer: 'Let the words of our mouth and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in thy sight.'

That certainly sounds better, does it not?

Please allow me to go on a bit longer than usual, to try to understand these hard verses.

1. Israel in captivity

Jerusalem had been destroyed. The Temple where the people of God learned to know God, had been burned down. And the royal family of King David had been wiped out.

Thousands and thousands of Jews had been led as captives to Babylon, where they were allowed to settle and create their own new communities.

And they had taken the advice of their prophet Jeremiah seriously.

Jeremiah gave them no hope for a speedy return to their homes in Israel, and he advised these deported people: build houses in Babylon, plant gardens, marry and have children, and submit as peaceful subjects to the local authorities.



These Jews in Babylon had a certain freedom, a certain degree of prosperity and comfort.

In Babylon they developed the idea of local synagogues, where they could celebrate their religion as they no longer had a Temple.

I am sure many Jews easily settled in that new life. After all, to live in Babylon! That was so awesome! Look at us - we live in great times!



Babylon was laid out on both sides of the Euphrates River; all around spread immense fertile plains, intersected by long straight canals, bordered by rows of trees. What an economy, what a world power!

The temple of the Chaldean divinity Bel, was rising from the plain, with eight stupendous levels, one above the other.

And the palace of the Babylonian

kings was more than twice the size of all of Jerusalem; it covered 15 square kilometers, with awe-inspiring terraced gardens and rich in its artificial cultivation.

Many Jews easily settled in that land. You know how that is: We adapt a bit, we live as the Babylonians a bit, sure we pray each week in our synagogue, and sure we stick to some food laws, but look at how good the life in Babylon is!

But this was not the feeling of all Jews. Many remembered Zion with a religious zeal. The land God had given them, the Temple and its worship of God. That is where they belonged, not in Babylon.

The author of this Psalm had a burning desire for that Temple, for that worship, for being at home with his Lord and God.

And this is one important aspect of real prayer: a strong desire for God.

If you go to the British Museum in London, you can see a piece of stone that comes from the palace of king Sennacherib in Nineveh. It shows how captives are led forth by soldiers while they are forced to play the lyre, and sing probably.

This was expected of the Jews in Babylon. 'Sing us a few of your nice worship songs. Entertain us with some musical parts of your religion, it sounds so nice.'

But how could they sing Psalms about Zion, like "God is in her midst, she shall not be moved'. Or 'Zion, the holy mountain, is the joy of the whole earth'. Or about the royal line of David 'I have set my king in Zion, my holy hill'.

All that was history! It seemed as if God's covenant with his people had ended.

Beside that, the Songs of Zion are the worship songs for the Lord, and the proper place to sing them is the temple, in the liturgy.

So the request of the Babylonians was cruel actually.

No wonder the Psalmist puts a curse on himself: He would rather lose his right hand than use it for playing the lyre. He would rather lose his voice than sing Songs of Zion for the entertainment of those who had destroyed Zion.

The Psalmist did not want to sing songs to entertain the Babylonians - but it is important to see that he did write this Psalm in Babylon. He knew God was also with him in Babylon.

We can pray to God in the most difficult of circumstances, even when we miss our homeland. Our family. Our former life.

God is present in Babylon, even here, in Nijmegen... in Arnhem. He can be found for those who ardently desire for him.

But important, the Psalmist wrote his song not for public display but as his true and heartfelt cry to God, his personal talk with God.

2. Jesus in exile, we in exile

Just as Jesus tells us to pray in our inner room. Prayer is not for show. Not for entertainment. Not to show others what nice words we choose or how religious we are. 'Pray to your Father in secret', Jesus told his followers. That is an important principle in prayer: it is for God, not for others to enjoy.



Jesus often came to Jerusalem, the city was back on its feet. Many Jews had returned, and the Temple was rebuilt.

There was worship again, the Psalms were sung, including Psalm 137.

Jesus himself knew this Psalm inside out; he had, with God his Father and the Holy Spirit, inspired the writers to pen the Psalms down. So when this writer in Babylon wrote the words on a piece of parchment, the Son of God looked, as it were, over his shoulder to see to it that he got it right.

And then the Son of God became Man. And he sung and prayed the Psalms that He knew so well.



For Jesus, this Psalm expressed first and foremost a desire for being with God, His Father. He had come from Him and would soon return to Him, and in the meantime, in his human years, He felt the pain of being away from His Father.

He was, as it were, in exile. Jerusalem was his Babylon.

The Bible describes heaven as the True Jerusalem, and as the real Temple. That is where God is. And Jesus had left this behind for serving you and me.

He has left his Jerusalem to be in our Babylon. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is quoted as saying:

I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father. (John 16:18)

Would this memory of celebrating with God in heaven not create an urgent desire in Jesus to be back in the heavenly Jerusalem, in the True Temple? To be with his Father?

So I think Psalm 137 described very well the yearning of Jesus to be back where he belonged.

And people who follow Jesus, know something of that same yearning for God.

Yes, we are humans, we belong in this world. But something is very amiss here - and we desire for God. We seek him. We pray to him.

The Jews in Babylon remembered their earthly, old, burned, sacked Jerusalem, and they wanted to be there. We have become part of a new, heavenly Jerusalem.

You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. (Hebrews 12:22)

That is our home; that is where we belong. And at times we desire for it so much. Sometimes it aches.

The desire for God - for perfection - for better days.

Real prayer and yearning will always go together. We cannot think of God, let alone address him, without a desire for more, for closer, for tighter, for better.

True, we are today already close to God, attached to God, without that we would not be able to pray at all. But we have not finished our journey to the promised land yet.

St Peter calls Christians ‘exiles of the dispersion’. That is who we are as long as we are here. Exiles.

St Paul says that ‘while we are at home in the body, we are away from the Lord.’

And we as we desire for our true homeland, to be with God, we endeavor to live a life for God today.

We do not want to sing of the song-sheet of the Babylonians. Our heart is not attached to this world, but to Jesus Christ, and to God our Father in heaven

This was certainly how the early church fathers read this Psalm.

St Augustine, for instance, said of the waters of Babylon, that they signify all things in this world that move, all things transient, everything temporal, everything that passes away.

Many people are so infatuated with those waters of this transient world that they allow themselves to be carried away by those waters. They do not sit beside the waters but they jump into it, says St Augustine.

But we, as Christians, he said, we find our joy in Holy Zion, in the Rock that is stable and where nothing moves. In God, our Rock and our Salvation. That is why we pray. We find our security in Him.

3. But those hard verses in the end...

But what about those hard verses. The curse on Edom and Babylon, and the desire of the writer to have the children of Babylon killed.

The least we can say is that when we pray, we do not have to be polite. God knows your heart, and when you pray, you can be brutally honest about what you feel.

We can be totally honest to God.

But I do not find this an adequate way to understand these verses - do not forget - Jesus prayed this Psalm... So let us be at least open to a more positive understanding.

First, some history. Before the destruction of Jerusalem, the prophets of Israel had predicted this destruction by Babylon and Edom.



But they had also predicted that Babylon and Edom would be severally punished for how they destroyed the city of God, the people of God, the temple of God.

Babylon and Edom were specifically condemned for their excessively violent way of destroying Jerusalem. It was totally normal in those days that the victorious armies would butcher all people, women and children included, and that is what happened. That is what Edom and Babylon did to the people of God.

So Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, had predicted that the same fate would befall Babylon and Edom. God had made his prophets predict this. God was to punish those nations that ravaged Jerusalem, the Temple, the people of God.

So the writer of the Psalm is doing nothing else but pray that God would do what the prophets had predicted. 'Lord, may your will be done'.

Prayer is not to bend the will of God, it is to align ourselves with God and what He wants from us.

This can make our Christian life painful. Our God has high standards. Prayer is not God adapting to us, but you adapting to God.

And if you think this Psalm shows an Old Testament attitude that does not suit New Testament Christians, then see what, in the book of Revelation, Christians who were martyred, prayed to God:

They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? (Revelation 6:10)

The idea that we privately take the sword - or a gun - in our own hands for revenge, that is wrong and explicitly forbidden in the Bible... But to pray that God will do it? That is a different thing.

Well, sometimes that is wrong also. When it is about petty things, personal vendettas. Settling scores.

But when the people of God are made to suffer by vicious enemies, to pray that God will do justice is not wrong, but in line with how God feels when his children are attacked.

Think of how brutally Christians in North Nigeria are treated by Boko Haram.

Of how ISIS, Islamic State, brutally killed anyone they did not like.

Of how the communist regime of North Korea treats our brothers and sisters - the people of God.

And however hard it is, we must still love those same people on a personal level. This is hard and there is much more to say about this, but another time.

When Jesus prayed the Psalm, it had some very interesting dimensions. He prayed for Edom and Babylon to be punished for what they did to destroy the Temple of God.

Jesus compared himself with the Temple of God.

And you remember which royal family ruled in Israel in the time when Jesus was killed? Those were the Herodians.

King Herod the Great killed the children in Bethlehem. And his son, also called Herod, played a crucial role when Jesus, the true Temple of God, was destroyed.

The family of King Herod, they were from Edom.

And in the book of Revelation, the name of Babylon occurs. It is the name of the city where our Lord was crucified.

Jesus prayed this prayer of Psalm 137 and knew what was to happen with him; when he prayed for Babylon and Edom to be destroyed, he must have thought of the people responsible for his own death. And judgement on them is justified.

But Jesus did love them to the end. Just as we try to love all people, even when God's judgement is justified.

Conclusion about prayer

I apologize - I have gone on too long. But allow me some conclusions.

When we pray, it is because we have a desire for God, for his perfect Kingdom.

We can only pray when we detach ourselves to some extent from this world - we simply cannot enjoy the life of Babylon because we belong to the heavenly Jerusalem, to God.

When we pray, we can be brutally honest to God. Share your sadness and your anger.

And prayer is not to bend the will of God, but when you know his will, in prayer you align yourself with God. 'Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.'

Amen.