

How shall we sing the Lord's Song?

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[0 : 00] Let us turn now to the Book of Psalms and Psalm 137. Book of Psalms and the Old Testament, Psalm 137.

And we can read the whole Psalm. By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.

On the willows, there we hung up our lyres, for there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land or in a strange land? 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, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations.

[1 : 20] O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us. Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock.

And I want to look particularly this evening at verse 4. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land or in a foreign land, as the ESV puts it here.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? The psalm that you have here is a psalm of exile.

Who wrote it? There are various theories, but none of them conclusive. Some think it might have been Ezra. Some think perhaps Nehemiah. Some even think it might have been Daniel.

But there is nothing in the psalm that would indicate who wrote it, or indeed even when it was written. There are some who think it was written after the exiles had returned from Babylon to Jerusalem.

[2 : 37] But the majority opinion is that it was written during the exile while they were in Babylon. And that's what seems so clear from the beginning. By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept.

And you will remember from the passage that we read in Jeremiah how God had continually warned Israel, or to be more correct, Judah, that there would come a time in which they would be taken into exile.

Note that it is not a captivity. This is not the way it was in Egypt. Egypt, although they had gone there originally with Jacob to reunite with Joseph there in time of famine, the time in Egypt eventually became a captivity.

But the time in Babylon is not a captivity. It is an exile. The children of Israel, or to be more correct, the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, that were taken into exile over various different periods.

The part that we read in the letter of Jeremiah, that Jeremiah there, indicates for us at the beginning those who were taken in the very first exile.

[4 : 07] In verse 2, this was after King Jeconiah and the Queen Mother, the eunuchs, the officials of Judah and Jerusalem, the craftsmen and the metal workers, had departed from Jerusalem.

And there comes a further time of rebellion against Babylon, in which eventually Nebuchadnezzar, as again I'm sure you know the story, destroys the city of Jerusalem, and takes virtually everyone into captivity in Babylon, or into exile in Babylon.

The two words very often are used interchangeably, but they shouldn't be. There's a great difference between an exile and a captivity. In the captivity, they were there as slaves.

They became slaves. Whereas in the exile, they were completely free. The majority of them, at least, were completely free, in order to pursue a normal life, if one can put it that way, in the city of

Babylon and round about, and where they were settled.

Now, what was the purpose of the exile? Why did God permit his people to be taken into exile? And again, if you go back to the history of the Jews, you find, of course, laid out for us clearly, in the books of Kings and Chronicles, the various steps through which the people were eventually taken into exile.

[5 : 37] You will remember that after Solomon, after the reign of Solomon, when Rehoboam takes over as king, that there is a split. There is a split between what becomes the ten tribes of the north, that is, and is called from then on, Israel, and the two tribes of the south, the tribe of Judah and the tribe of Benjamin, who remained faithful, if one can put it that way, to the house of David.

And the ten tribes of the north are eventually conquered by Assyria, and are taken into captivity in Assyria, and scattered throughout various towns and cities there.

And there, they disappeared. The ten tribes, we have no knowledge of them after that. There are many who hold various theories about the migration of the ten tribes after that, and where they went.

And some of these theories are actually quite interesting, but they're certainly not scriptural. They may be historical, but they're certainly not scriptural. But the two tribes that remain are left round about Jerusalem, Judah and Benjamin, but yet, they still fail, time and time again, to heed the warnings of the prophets that the Lord sends to them.

If you read the prophecy of Isaiah, the prophecy of Jeremiah, read the history of Kings and Chronicles, you will see time and time again how Israel falls into idolatry.

[7 : 25] And it starts even as they come out of Egypt on their way to the promised land. Do you remember that while Moses was on top of the mountain, Moses and Aaron with them, that the people turned to worship the golden calf.

And then if you look at the history through the book of Judges, you find time and time again it says that there was no king in Israel, and people did what was right in their own eyes.

How little things have changed. Isn't that more or less the situation that we have nowadays? That people still do what is right in their own eyes.

But that's another theme altogether. And so you can trace from the end of the book of Judges when idolatry comes, brought in by Micah and the tribe of Dan, that eventually, time and time again, as the judges rescue Israel and restore the worship of God, the same thing happens right through the reign of the kings.

All you have to do is look, for example, at the reign of Manasseh. How Manasseh attempted not only to eliminate completely the worship of God, but also to turn the temple, the temple of Solomon, into a place of idolatry until he himself is taken into Babylon and captivity and there miraculously converted.

[9 : 08] And that was after his own father, Hezekiah, had attempted to restore and to cleanse Judah and Jerusalem of its idol worship. And so it is that God eventually makes it absolutely clear in both Isaiah and Jeremiah that the children of Judah and Benjamin will be taken into captivity, into exile in Babylon for a period of 70 years.

Now that was stated very clearly in the letter that Jeremiah sent, which we read. But there are other places in Scripture where it is mentioned very clearly as well.

What was God's purpose in taking his people, his covenant people, into exile? Well, you will remember, of course, that the exile is also the time of great prophecy.

that there we have Daniel and Ezekiel. And there are many ways in which the book of Daniel closes the canon of the Old Testament.

And then afterwards comes the restoration period where they return to Jerusalem with Esra and with Nehemiah. But the psalm that we have here is focusing on this period of exile.

[10 : 46] Who did the Jews worship while they were in exile? And it's quite clear here from the psalm and from various other parts of the book of Daniel and Ezekiel and so on that they still were allowed to continue to worship their God.

they were not forbidden and not forced to worship the Babylonian gods. The Babylonians worshipped the sun and the stars and a variety of other things.

And again, the book of Daniel lays out so clearly for us that period of captivity where Babylon is not only captured later on, of course, by Cyrus and the prophecy which Isaiah had made that Cyrus would be the one instrumental in bringing the Jews back to Jerusalem.

Many believe that it was Daniel who showed that prophecy to Cyrus and that was one of the reasons why he permitted the return and in fact not only permitted it but financed a great part of it as well.

And you can read that in the prophecy of Isaiah in chapter 40 onwards and so on in chapter 42. God is still present in Babel.

[12:11] In fact, God has encouraged in the letter that the people are to settle there, build houses, etc. and that they will be there in order to increase as a people.

But he has also provided for them a way to worship. He has given them the freedom to worship. It was in Babylon, round about Babylon, that the synagogues first were built, first developed as the Jewish places of worship.

There had been no synagogues in Israel before that. And it is, of course, remarkable that it is over a generation that this takes place.

A period of 70 years. Now, if you think of the significance of the 70 years as a generation, Psalm 90 in verse 10 tells us that the normal lifespan that we can expect is 3 score and 10.

[13:23] That is 70. Or perhaps with more strength, maybe up to 80 years. And there was a long period of history, of course, and there are still many places where that is not yet the case due to a variety of different factors.

But the point was that the generation that had gone into exile in Babylon, very few of them, if any, actually returned.

Most of the generation that went would die in Babylon and it was the next generation that returned. There were some who had been taken as a very, as very young people, probably Nehemiah was one of them.

But Daniel, for example, Daniel never returned from exile in Babylon, even although, as far as we can see, he lived well into his 90s, but he did not return.

And it is remarkable that in a period of a generation, idolatry is eliminated from Israel, from the Jewish worship.

[14:36] The Jews never again in their history worshipped idols. Never again. that was God's purpose in taking them into exile was to cleanse idolatry from the people.

And so, he brings them back then to a period of restoration after that. But the psalm here concentrates on the experience of God's people, of the Lord's people in exile.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? It's quite remarkable, is it not, that wherever the Jews go in the world, they are always Jews.

Think, for example, of the people who have emigrated from here, from this island, to so many parts of the world. Those who have emigrated still call themselves Yosefs.

But the next generation and the third generation may have no interest whatsoever in the land of their grandparents.

[15:59] But nevertheless, wherever the Jews go in the world, each generation maintains its Jewish identity.

It's quite a remarkable thing. And again, that is, of course, another theme. You would think that after a period of a time overseas, so many people from this island express so often their homesickness. perhaps not the best word for it. I don't think it's an adequate translation of the Gaelic word chianalus. That when you have chianalus for something, you remember it in a particularly special way.

It is, there is a touch of homesickness with it, but there's also in the chianalus a kind of almost romanticized memory of what things were like and how good they were.

And you find that so often expressed in people's writings. And one has to question and say, well, if they were that good, why did you leave in the first place? But again, that's another theme altogether.

[17:14] But this is, in a sense, the kind of chianalus or homesickness that the Lord's people are feeling here in a foreign land in Babylon.

And you notice that here, by the waters of Babylon, it doesn't specify for us which one of the rivers it actually was. There were several tributaries and rivers that surrounded the city of Babylon.

Ezekiel talks about the river Kedar, but it may well have been the Euphrates. By the waters of Babylon, we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.

Now, the word Zion is quite an interesting word. And again, if you take it on its modern connotations, you will find that it is used in a sort of depreciative way by so many people who refer to people as Zionists, etc.

That is, the restoration of the state of Israel, usually, and coupled up with Jewish independence and all the other political issues that are there that I'm not going to get into here.

[18:21] Zion is used throughout scripture to refer principally to Mount Zion. And Mount Zion was one hill on one side of Jerusalem.

Mount Moriah was on the other side of Jerusalem. And between both these hills, the temple had been constructed. It's very difficult nowadays to see because of the buildings of the temple and the great mosque there and so on, to see exactly where Mount Zion actually was.

But in scripture, Mount Zion is always symbolic of and represents the temple and the presence of God.

And you will remember, of course, that when the first temple was built on Mount Zion by Solomon, that at its consecration it was filled with the Shekinah glory, that the presence of the Lord was seen there in the smoke that filled the temple.

That presence has now departed. And you will remember that it is Nebuchadnezzar who destroys Jerusalem, who demolishes the temple, and who takes the Ark of the Covenant, the symbol of God's presence, who takes it away into Babylon.

[19:57] We never hear of the Ark of the Covenant again. It's quite an interesting study, if you ever have time and nothing else to do, to study or to read all the various theories about where the Ark of the Covenant actually is nowadays.

Some think it's still hidden underneath the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Others maintain it's in a cave, in a church in Ethiopia, and so on and so on.

That will just whet your appetite and you can look up yourself, all the various things connected with that. But the Shekinah glory had departed. And no wonder they sit down to weep when they remember Zion.

Now we don't know if any of the ones who are in this song, this sound, had ever actually been in Zion. They may well have been born in Babylon, but some of them might well

be the original exiles. By the waters of Babylon there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. And what do they do?

[21:18] They hang up their lyres, or their harps as it is in another version, on the willows.

Because they are being asked to sing one of the songs of Zion, and yet their sadness prohibits them from singing.

how shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? But notice that the harps, the lyres, are not destroyed.

They are simply hung on the willows. Some people think that it is from there that the name of the weeping willow actually comes, associated with this in Babylon.

And they feel that they are unable to sing any songs in praise of God. Let my tongue, verse 6, let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you.

But yet, even like the dew of today, there is this longing to return to Jerusalem. Every Jew that you meet in any country in the world, and I met many in Latin America, all had the dream of eventually at least returning to Israel to visit Jerusalem, if not to actually emigrate and stay there.

[22:52] and I know some who actually went to live there for a period of time and discovered that it was not what they were expecting and eventually returned.

But there is this thing in the blood that wants to return to the place of its origin. If I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

and one has to wonder here if the Jews are remembering just the place, or are they also remembering everything that the place symbolized, the presence of God and the worship of God.

They were not forbidden to worship God, the God of Israel, in Babylon, quite the opposite. And therefore it appears that although the harps were hung, that they were also taken down and retuned from time to time in order to worship God in exile.

Isn't that the same picture as we were looking at this morning of the believer in a foreign land singing the Lord's song?

[24:22] Here you are this evening, my Christian friend, and you are in a strange land. You are in a foreign land. And like the next generation in Babylon, you have no knowledge of the original land.

You don't remember, and you couldn't remember, remember what Eden was like. How your ancestors were expelled from Eden, from the Garden of Eden, into a strange land, into a foreign land.

But the process is exactly the same. How can you and I sing the Lord's song here in a strange land?

And perhaps some will say immediately, well, we know nothing else. We know no other land. We know no other way of worshipping the Lord except the way that we do it here.

But wait a minute. There is another way, and you do know another way. because you have been given a revelation that in time to come, you will return from the exile of this foreign land into a new Jerusalem, into a new place.

[25 : 59] And isn't this what we see in the visions that John is given in the book of Revelation? if we look at chapter 14, we see John beholding the following, and he says in chapter 14, then I looked and behold on Mount Sion, and notes again, the same Sion, the presence of the Lord, stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his father's name written on their foreheads.

And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters, and like the sound of loud thunder, the voice I heard was like a sound of harpists playing on their harpists, and they were singing a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures, and before the elders.

No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. Now again, remember of course that the vision of John and Revelation, is full of symbolism, and the 144,000 is not to be taken literally.

144,000 is 12 times 12, etc., and 12 is a multiple of 4 by 3. 4 is used in numerology and revelation as the universal number, while 3 is the number of the Trinity.

So 4 times 3 equals 12, 12 squared, 144. And if you look again, of course, throughout the book of Revelation and throughout the Old and the New Testament, you will see the significance of the figure 12.

[27 : 47] There are 12 tribes. There are 12 apostles. And if you look in Revelation 21, you'll see the foundation of the church is the 12 tribes and the 12 apostles.

12,000. But a new song is given to those who come into the new Mount Zion. And you see exactly the same thing again in chapter 15 in Revelation.

When John sees, I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire, and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.

And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of the Lord, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty, just and through are your ways, O King of the nations.

Who will not fear, O Lord, and glorify your name, for you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship you for your righteous acts.

[28 : 58] have been revealed. You see, you and I, the songs that we sing in this land, in this strange land, are not the final songs that we will sing.

How does the psalmist put it? David puts it in Psalm 40 that he put a new song in my mouth. And that new song will not reach all its glorious harmony and its full volume until we are singing it no longer in exile but in heaven itself.

You see, the symbolism of the Old Testament leads us from the captivity of sin in Egypt into the promised land in Canaan. sin in But we see again in that history how human frailty makes such a mess of the promised land.

But there is a further promise throughout scripture that the Lord's people will be taken from exile.

The exile that we are in here, surrounded by sin, into a land of glorious harmony to sing a new song in heaven.

How can we still sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Well, we sing it because we know no other way to worship at the moment. We have no choice except to sing it in the way that it has been revealed to us.

[30 : 37] That is what you and I do as we come to worship. worship. We worship in the only way that we know how, according to the rule of scripture that has been given to us.

We worship by singing what we believe are spirit-inspired psalms. Sometimes we even sing parts of the scriptures themselves.

But we are still singing the Lord's song in a strange land. have you ever wondered, have you ever thought of how wonderful it will be to sing the psalm, the song of Moses and the Lamb in heaven, in the new Jerusalem.

What a glorious sound that will be, where there will be nothing that will prevent us from expressing our praise to the Lamb of God in a way that we are hindered here on earth from doing.

You see, more and more our ability to praise God here on earth is being restricted. It's being restricted in so many ways.

[31 : 58] We were looking this morning at the problem of the church being asleep. And perhaps I didn't bring it out quite as strongly as I should have done. How often the church is asleep and we see it even in scripture.

Look at the way the disciples were asleep in Gethsemane. Look at the way that they were even asleep on the Mount of Transfiguration. How often has the church throughout its history been asleep?

and it takes times of reformation and times of refreshing for the church to come alive again. And the book of Daniel tells us so clearly how God takes his church into exile and rebuilds it.

That's one of the major themes of the book of Daniel, that God is rebuilding his church. And there are many who think that we are going through a period of time, now, in the last number of years, where God is in the process of rebuilding his church.

If you look at the history of the church, the cyclical worldwide history of the church, you find some fascinating things. look at some of the places where the gospel was strong.

[33 : 33] Look at the churches that Paul planted, the churches of Asia Minor, nowadays modern Turkey. Where are they now? How many Christians are left in modern day Turkey?

Move a few centuries forward and come to that great figure of Augustine of Hippo, whose theological works we look at so often. where was Hippo?

North Africa. And the church in North Africa, in Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and various other places, is recently re-emerging, still facing immense persecution.

But for periods of time, for centuries where it was asleep, dominated completely by the Muslim faith, it is re-emerging.

God is rebuilding his church. All you have to do again is look at how the word of God has spread through the centuries of time to places that it never was before, to the Americas.

[34 : 47] How unsuccessful it seemed, even in the time of the apostles, apostles, to bring the word of God into places like India and Asia.

And yet, we hear even now that there is a rich harvest taking place in China and in various other Asian countries. Of course, there is still persecution.

temptation. But is the church perhaps awaking from its sleep in some areas of the world? And you and I have to question ourselves as to whether we as a church are asleep even here.

We are in our comfort zone. How if I forget you, O Jerusalem? How can we forget? Well, sometimes we become so comfortable in the situation that we're in that we just slip into laxness and relaxation.

How many times should you and I have spoken out to others about the things of God and yet we don't do so?

[36 : 03] We don't want to stir up trouble. We don't want to break the peace. We don't want to have confrontation with people. Of course not. But nevertheless, we should still stand up for the principles of God's word.

How long has the church and its apathetic state been responsible for the liberalism that has crept into it? Been responsible for its departure from the principles of the word of God?

God's God's word and that is something that you and I have to question in our own denomination, never mind pointing the fingers at others.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Well, if we stop singing it completely, it would only take a generation for the church to disappear.

how quickly could it happen that the next generation after us would have no interest whatsoever in the things of God?

[37 : 15] And are we not perhaps reaping the fruit of that in the way that the word of God has been eliminated from our schools, from our primary schools, in the way that even simple things like the saying of grace at a school lunch is no longer permitted because somebody objects to it?

We just don't stand up for our principles as a majority. The church has become apathetic and yet maybe perhaps we need a time of exile in which the church is being rebuilt.

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Well we can only sing it by retuning our harps and our lyres. The harps and lyres were not destroyed.

They were simply hung up for a period of time. But every so often you have to take a musical instrument down and retune it and restring it before it will produce its music again.

And perhaps you and I need to have our harps retuned. Perhaps we have hung them up on the willows. But nevertheless it is still a period of rebuilding.

[38 : 48] things. Ever since man was expelled from Eden, from the Garden of Eden, from the original temple there, there is something in the human being that looks forward to the re-establishing of the Garden of Eden again.

That's what you see in Revelation. Remember that Scripture begins in a garden and Scripture ends in a garden.

If you look at Revelation 22 you will see that there the city of New Jerusalem is built and laid out as a garden.

And that is where you and I should have our minds set. Are you and I looking forward to singing the songs of Zion in the New Jerusalem?

Or are we so busy that our mind is always fixed on the things of this world? And yet we still find time to sing the Lord's song here in this strange land and we think that this is the be-all and end-all of our existence.

[40 : 09] To get through this life and to do the best that we can. How often we forget that we are mere pilgrims in this land.

That we will be here only for a short number of years. And that that short number of years contain compared to eternity.

It's like a grain of sand on all the beaches of the world. How often is your mind on your eternal home?

If I have to confess myself, it's not often that I think of these things. You're sort of too busy with other things. Too busy getting on with life.

Perhaps even too busy studying, preparing sermons to think of these things in detail. And yet there are times when I stop and think of these things.

[41 : 22] And perhaps more so as I advance in years. And the time of my departure comes closer and closer. That the believer begins to fix his mind more and more on the things of heaven.

Oh, I still sing and you and I will still sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. We continue to do so because we have no other way to express our praise and our worship except to sing this song. But there is a day coming. And that day coming is referred to in the final verses of the psalm. It seems a strange ending to this psalm.

If we look at verses 7 to 9, remember oh Lord against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem how they said, lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations.

You remember that the Edomites were the descendants of Esau. and those who had stood against the children of Israel on their way to the promised land.

[42 : 36] But yet God would eventually destroy them. And the same way the daughter of Babylon who has taken the Jews into captivity or daughter of Babylon doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us.

And it seems almost like the psalm ends on a note of revenge, that the people want revenge against those who have done them harm.

And it seems even in the last verse such a terrible thing to think of. Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock.

this is what exactly was done to the Jewish infants when the people were taken into exile, when people were conquered.

They weren't interested in young children and babies being taken into exile and into captivity because there was no way of feeding. They wouldn't have survived the march into exile anyway.

[43 : 54] and quite simply they were taken by the legs and swung against a rock so that their head was shattered. That was fairly standard practice in those days in warfare.

It may seem horrendous to us and there are many people who say that the Bible tells such terrible things as if such terrible things don't happen in our own times.

Man has progressed enormously in his knowledge and his technology but the human being in terms of his cruelty to others hasn't changed one bit.

We tend to think that the crucifixion of the Romans was one of the most horrific ways to die. have a look at some of the things that are going on in other countries in the world even at this time.

Man has advanced in many things but his sinful character remains the same. It hasn't changed.

[45 : 10] Man's inhumanity to man throughout time has remained the same. But yet this is not a cry of revenge but more a cry of vengeance.

Who takes vengeance? Vengeance is mine says the Lord. I will repay. And you find that even in Deuteronomy 32.

You find it again in the bit of the letter that we read. it is the Lord who controls vengeance. And in due time he does exactly that.

Where is Babylon now? Even the exact location and the foundations and the remains of Babylon are disputed by archaeologists.

There's nothing left or very little left of what once was a magnificent city. And God of course through the prophets if you look at the prophecies God had foretold that that would be the case.

[46 : 27] But there is one thing that remains constant and one thing that remains true. God's promises to his covenant people God's covenant to the church are promises that never fail.

And you and I may be singing a strange song or singing the Lord's song in a strange land at the moment. But God's covenant promise to all his people is that they will sing a new song the song of Moses and the Lamb.

in circumstances that we can only speculate about as to their wonder and their glory and their intensity. Those are the promises laid forth in Scripture for the Lord's people.

But there are other promises laid forth to those who reject the Lord Jesus Christ. I don't have to remind you of what they are.

I'm sure you've heard of them many, many times. But that is the comparison that you are given throughout Scripture.

[47 : 58] That the Lord's people will glorify his name in eternity forever. forever. And yet those who are not the Lord's people will be tormented and damned throughout eternity.

that's the choice that is laid before you this evening once again. It is a very clear choice.

And you are responsible for the choice that you make. May the Lord grant that he guides you to a knowledge of him.

Let us pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.