

"Babylon or Jerusalem?" Psalm 137

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[0:00] Psalm 37. 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.

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 who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock. So not long after the horrific attacks by Hamas in October of 2023, 1,400 Israelis, both Jews and Arabs, dead.

A friend of mine was visiting with his friend and the topic came up and my friend's friend said to him, there would be peace if everyone would just stop fighting.

[1:34] It's kind of true. My friend's friend, however, didn't see or read about the barbarism, the murders, the kidnappings, all of the very difficult, terrible things that was on the news and on Facebook and Twitter and social media nonstop for weeks and months.

But I guess it's technically true. If people would stop fighting, there would be peace. Is this person, the friend of my friend, is their comment actually the way forward or is it terribly ignorant?

October 7th wasn't the only terrible thing that's happened in the world. The world is marked, marked with catastrophe, marked with war.

A few weeks back when we were looking in Romans, we were in Romans, I made the comment, I forget exactly the right stat, but it's something like the last 3,000 years of recorded history, there's only been about 90-ish years where there hasn't been an ongoing war.

We are a warring bunch. So is the way to peace simply just to drop our arms? We're going to look at Psalm 137 this morning. If you were listening or even half listening when Tyler read it, I'm sure your ears perked up at the last verse, verse 9 of 137.

[3:06] And this is what it says, Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rocks. It might be the hardest verse in Scripture.

C.S. Lewis, and I'm a big C.S. Lewis fan, he calls this psalm and specifically this verse devilish. He calls it devilish. But I'm going to suggest to you and try to show in Scripture that this psalm is actually incredibly important and that line itself is incredibly important and critical if we are to know justice and overcome the evil in and around us.

So, 137, Psalm 137. If you could follow along, that would be great. I've broken up the text into three parts. The first part, verses 1 to 3, 1 to 4, 1 to 3, is resist Babylon.

The second one, verses 4 to 6, remember Jerusalem. And finally, verses 7 to 9, request justice. Resist Babylon, remember Jerusalem, request justice.

[4:23] And I'll just say, request is not the greatest term, but it's a word to use, but it started with an R. I went for it. Okay? The triple R this morning. Anyways, jump with me in verses 1 to 3 before we read.

It's helpful for us to understand a bit of the background. Okay? Babylon was a very cruel, cruel empire. Like the Assyrians before them, they were, they didn't exactly observe international law when it came to warfare.

So, some 2,600 years ago, Babylon besieged the southern kingdom of Israel. They surrounded Jerusalem, eventually destroying the walls and raising the temple to the ground.

They were cruel. The accounts throughout the prophetic books are shocking to read of what they've done. Now, we'll touch on that in a bit, but just to set the table, Babylon was cruel.

And after Jerusalem was conquered, they enslaved the social and religious upper class, the elite, so to speak, of Israel. This was their practice. They would conquer a region, conquer a nation, and

take their best, brightest, and youngest, back to Babylon to essentially become Babylonian.

[5:42] We get a glimpse of this in the book of Daniel, if you're familiar at all with the book of Daniel. But make no mistake, Israel found itself in exile precisely because of God's judgment.

The prophetic books are a collection of God imploring his people to turn away from evil. Turn away from evil. Turn back to me.

And even though, time and again, they would make a partial return, they would always find themselves returning to evil. So Babylon became an agent of God's judgment towards Israel. Nevertheless, nevertheless, they were still horrendously cruel and unjust. Notice how, in verse 4, what does it say? How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?

Verse 3, for there are captors. See, it wasn't just that Babylon was an agent of God and therefore are, they're forgiven for all of the terrible things that they've done.

[6:51] No, no, no, no. They're still held to account. They did horrendous things. They kidnapped people, breaking up families, killing, murdering, even worse. So let's, as that is a bit of a background, let's read verses 1 to 4 again and we'll jump into it.

Asking the question, why and how should we resist Babylon? By the waters of Babylon, there we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres, for there are captors required of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, sing us one of the songs of Zion. Zion is synonymous with Jerusalem. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? You see the, like I mentioned already, Babylon, their big MO was essentially not just to conquer but to humiliate and ultimately to assimilate its conquered people, whatever nation that they conquered. what they were demanding of the Israelites isn't merely just humiliation but to abandon their God, to abandon the Lord God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

They want Israel to play religious songs that ought to have filled the temple but instead to play them for their own amusement.

[8:15] It's a humiliating, humiliating act and a real indictment on the God of Israel. But here's the thing, why not?

Okay? If I'm an Israelite, why not play the song? God didn't come through for me. Alright? If this is a God that keeps promises, the God that is supposed to be the God above all gods, which is to say the only God, then maybe he's a bit of a liar because the Babylonian gods gave them the victory. Our God didn't give us the victory. Israel has been handily conquered. The Babylonians might as well have just said, listen, your God has not come through.

Our gods are stronger. Become Babylonians. Listen, we can offer you much, okay? This is the fertile crescent. I don't think that was their term back then.

Nevertheless, this is the fertile crescent. Listen, we have streams, we have rivers, we have tributaries, we have willows, all pictures of a calm, a shaded, peaceful, abundant land.

[9:23] Peaceful, again, relative peace. But listen, we have lots to offer. Become Babylonians. Worship our gods. Bend a knee. If you, again, remember the book of Daniel in the Old Testament, this is exactly what was said to Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, also known as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego.

You can read that in Daniel 3 and 4. So, here's the thing though. Babylon as a kingdom did not persist. It was overtaken eventually by Persia. But, Babylon has become a forever symbol of whatever the spirit is that pits itself against God's people.

For every generation of God's people, there will always be a Babylon that seeks to cause compromise and to humiliate the God of the Bible.

Always. Babylon is a symbol of everything that is anti-God. Interestingly, in Revelation, if you read through it, very, very difficult book to weigh through.

Babylon features quite a bit in that book as an anti-Christ, as an anti-God, as this evil city, the city of the world.

[10:45] So, I think it's fair to say that as we read this psalm, we can rightly understand Babylon as embodying the spirit of the age.

Whatever age that we find ourselves in. Babylon represents the spirit of the age. So, what do I mean by the spirit of the age? A couple of years ago, Christine and I were at a dinner with our bishop, Bishop Dan Gifford.

Wonderful guy. Wonderful man. And somebody at the table asked him, Bishop, what is the spirit of this age? Interesting to put the leader of our denomination on the spot right there.

But Dan, Bishop Dan, came with a wonderful reply. He said, in 2020, I guess it would be 2024, in 2024 Canada, the spirit of the age is, and then he used the word self-actualization.

Big word. But he went on to explain, and I think he's right, this idea that we are ultimate authorities in our own lives. Our happiness is the prime objective that we all ought to seek.

[12:01] We set the parameters of what is moral or immoral. We set the parameters of what is just or unjust. And ultimately, we get to decide what defines us above all else.

We're not subject to our families, our family identity, our historical identity. We get to pave our own way. We get to reinvent ourselves if we want.

And I think Dan is right. I think Bishop Dan is right. I think this is the spirit of the age. This idea that we are the ultimate authority, we are the ultimate arbiter of what is right and what is wrong.

For me, and it can be different for you. That's a beauty of the age we live in. So we see if Babylon represents the spirit of the age, then Babylon will for sure be at odds with God and his people because God through scriptures and through the teaching of the church declares to us that we actually have an identity that is not plastic.

We don't get to decide at the very core of what is right or what is wrong, what is just or what is unjust. You see, Babylon always tries to downplay the sacredness and joy of what it means to be a human being made in God's image.

[13:33] In our age, it says, you decide. You don't need to follow God. You don't need to be defined by him. You know, the spirit of the age says that we are wooden and stiff until we find and follow our true purpose, until we listen and follow our hearts, our passions, our happiness above all else.

That's the way to be a true person. But this is a terribly hard thing to push back against, to resist, because that is ultimately, I think, what we're called to do, is to resist Babylon, to resist the spirit of the age.

we are people that dwell in Babylon. We breathe its air, we eat its food, we work in its government, we participate in its leisure activities, we watch its movies, everything about it we find ourselves in. it is the very air we breathe, as Glenn Scrivener puts it. We read his book a couple years ago, a wonderful book, worth your time to reread or read for the first time.

So it's very difficult to resist, is it not? It's not simply as easy as just saying, hey, listen, guys, try not to be Babylonian. Resist the spirit of the age.

[15:04] We are tempted at every turn. Again, notice verse four, why they're calling the land that they're in a foreign land.

It is not just because it is geographically far from Jerusalem, from who God is, but it's being spiritually exiled.

Once again, Israel has found itself in exile. It's not the first time. And they are tempted to forget the one true God. So when we try to think about how to resist Babylon, it's not simply to turn away from the spirit of the age, but turn towards something, or in this case, to someone.

And this brings us to our second point, that we can't just resist Babylon, but we need to remember Jerusalem. Look with me at verses five and six. verse five if I forget you, oh 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. what exactly is Jerusalem?

[16:22] If you've ever been there, it's a pretty cool city, but it's a city. It's actually a bit dirty actually, to come to think of it. It's full of feral cats, like at night you just hear screeching the whole time.

Nevertheless, it is a wonderful city, it's a cool place to walk through, the old city to take in potentially the very places where Jesus himself walked. to see where the temple once stood.

But if Babylon represents the spirit of the age throughout all time, then Jerusalem must represent something else as well. It must be bigger than just the one city, the holy city of Jerusalem in modern day Israel.

You see, Jerusalem represents the very presence of God. God has made his dwelling in Jerusalem to be with his people.

He will be their God, they will be his people. So, it's important that we remember that Jerusalem, again, represents his very presence, but God is not subject to a specific locale, okay?

[17 : 35] It's not like he lives in a place and he has to jump on a plane to go to another place. God has made everything and he is everywhere. So, without diminishing the place of the actual city of Jerusalem, it's still a wonderful city.

I think it's precious in God's eyes and it's worth our prayers to pray for its peace. Nevertheless, Psalm 137, and I would say throughout the rest of scripture, Jerusalem is this picture of God dwelling amongst his people.

It's a heavenly city, the place where God himself is. therefore, we have to understand that the city of Jerusalem, this heavenly city, will always be pitted against Babylon, the city of this world.

And this is the way we resist Babylon, by remembering Jerusalem. How do we do this? Well, at the very least, we, of course, turn our gaze away from Babylon, but it also is a call to embrace the Lord with a posture that is resolved to put our devotion towards him, to find our ultimate purpose and joy in him.

Again, if the spirit of the age says that we can be defined by our own doing, that we can sit on our own throne, the opposite would be to let God himself define us and to worship him at the exclusion of all others.

[19 : 10] what I don't think this is, it's not a call to find joy only in God so that we don't enjoy the goodness of this life, but rather that we find our highest joy exclusively in him.

We see this precisely in verse 6. If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. But here's a wonderful thing to consider.

joy. This is an act of faith. For the very reasons I mentioned before about the draw and the pull of Babylon towards us. It's an act of faith to believe that actual joy can be found in God.

Joy found in submitting, okay, submitting to God. We don't like this word. trusting that God is who he says he is and that he calls us to live in a certain way, trusting in him that we are not the sun upon which everything orbits, but that he is and we orbit around him.

It requires faith to believe that there is incredible joy in Jesus' words when he says, if you would lose your life for my sake and the gospels, you will gain it.

[20 : 35] If you don't hate even your own life, you are unworthy to follow me. You are to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and love your neighbors as yourself.

Which is to say that your priorities are shifted away from you and towards God and others. It takes faith to trust in these words, to believe them as joy-filled words.

You see, the heavenly city, Jerusalem, is always going to be an upside-down city from the perspective of Babylon. Lose your life for God and for others.

Don't make your career your highest joy. Don't make earning potential your chief end. don't be defined by your home or your social circles.

Don't worship youth. Be committed to your spouse even if you are in a season of unhappiness. Have a public faith, not just a private one.

[21 : 45] Devote your life to serving others. Is this really what we are being called to? That our happiness isn't the ultimate end? You start to see that for a culture, for an age that is obsessed with the self, the call to be citizens of Jerusalem, to trust in the Lord, to have faith that his ways are truly joy-filled seem completely upside-down.

Babylon will always resist Jerusalem, so the call is always to remember her.

Babylon will always try to resist Jerusalem with cruelty, showing no quarter. Therefore, we must pray and have assurance that Babylon will not endure.

Because if it will endure, if the spirit of the age will persist for all time, then where is the hope? It's a good question.

Let's get to our third and final point, verses 7 to 9. And this is the very difficult section in our text this morning. Verses 7 to 9. Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites, the Edomites, by the way, are the ethnic offspring of Esau.

[23 : 18] If you know the scriptures at all, Jacob and Esau were brothers. These are the Edomites come from Esau.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites, the day of Jerusalem, how they said, lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations. 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. St. Augustine doesn't even bother dealing with how crazy this is.

He allegorizes the whole thing, and I'm very tempted to do the same, except that it actually happened, according to scripture. It actually happened. And therefore, even though these are some of the most shocking verses in all of scripture, they're very hard to read, they're hard to stomach, let's walk towards them together and see what the Lord would speak to us about through them today.

So let's take a look for a moment and look at the brutality of Babylon and the betrayal of Edom. To truly understand what has been said and to understand the background here, we have to understand the context of the exile.

[24 : 47] Babylon, like Assyria before them, conquered with such cruelty that it would be something akin to what you might remember happened with ISIS a few years back or like I've referenced already what happened in October 7th.

horrendous, hideous barbarism. This was what they did, this is how they operated. There's no distinction between soldier or child, a baby, a woman, even a pregnant woman.

The Babylonians took great pleasure in inciting utter torment and fear in how they went about systematically killing. Read through the later part of 2 Kings if you want a more graphic detail of what happened.

It's really horrendous and that's all I'll say about it. They captured, like I mentioned before, they captured Jerusalem's best, raised the walls, destroyed the temple, left the survivors in utter dismay. If genocide is defined as a systematic killing and erasure of a people and their culture and way of life, the Babylonians were guilty of trying. And while this was happening, Israel's neighbor and ethnic kin, the Edomites, not only stood idly by, they did not come to help their brothers, but they even cheered on the Babylonians as they ravaged and slaughtered.

[26 : 14] I mean, right here, lay it bare, lay it bare down to its foundations. It is saying, strip them naked and utterly humiliate them. Don't just destroy them, don't just kill them, humiliate them completely.

So what we see in verses 7 to 9, as graphic and as intense as it is, and it certainly is that, ultimately it's a request for justice.

It's a cry for justice. It's an imploring of God to be just, to be who he is. God, act justly.

And it's a call for the punishment to fit the crime. Listen, we are near 100 years of post-World War II. All of us have grown up with the Geneva Convention. If there's war crimes, we can argue about how effective it is later on, but there's the hag. There's an international court.

[27 : 21] If war crimes are committed, we can, hopefully, at least, accuse people of war crimes, but hopefully hold them to account. None of that existed back then. There were no rules of warfare.

The Babylonians weren't governed by an agreed upon set of rules. Nevertheless, justice had to be executed.

violated. So what we see here is something called the law of retaliation. Okay? So instead of in the ancient world, if you were wronged, and then, you know, as vengeance would have it, I would then kill your entire tribe.

No, the law of retaliation would say, hold on a second, an eye for an eye. Okay? A tooth for a tooth. It was a way to punish, to suppress evil, without it spilling over into decades and generations of warfare.

This is what the Israelites are calling for. Okay? We see this, again, in the first part of verse 6.

Sorry, the first part of verse 7. Down in verse 8.

[28 : 32] Apologies. O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you, okay, repays you with what you have done to us. This is exactly what the Babylonians did.

So what the Israelites are calling for is justice. But that doesn't take the edge off of this verse, does it? Okay? It's still very hard to stomach. It's still very hard to understand.

But what if these verses expressed not hatred but ultimately love? Very scandalous thing to suggest but let me put this forward to you.

Loving goodness and peace always necessitates always necessitates hating evil. It is not enough to have a beautiful garden by only planting seeds.

You need to weed, okay? You need to make sure that no critters are going to come to eat the fruit of your labor. It's not enough to just love peace and love goodness without first hating evil.

[29 : 42] To ignore evil or to deal with it gently it's not a merciful act. It doesn't show somebody to be morally virtuous. It's actually the very core of being unjust.

It saps the dignity of the victim. It cheapens love. It allows for evil to persist and suffering to continue. So what we have here is a personal cry from the exiles but it is more than that, okay? It's more than that. To pray this prayer, it's also an act of faith. Again, the Israelites are being humiliated by the Babylonians.

Your God is nothing. Play his sacred music for us to dance to. Right? They're humiliating the Israelites. So this cry itself, it is a cry of faith.

For our natural inclination is what? For revenge. Okay? To have sweet, sweet revenge and to do to others not just what they've done to us but to make them suffer, to humiliate them back.

[30 : 52] To make them feel even worse. But in praying this prayer, the Israelites are calling God to do what he has promised, ultimately. To bring justice and to remember his promises to deal with sin in all of its totality.

So as horrific as it is to read verse 9, and it should be horrific for us, I think C.S. Lewis is right to an extent to call it devilish. Okay?

Because it, how else can you describe such a verse, such an action? But it's not devilish in that if we read it with an understanding that God hates evil and cannot let it persist, then we see that it is an act of God's love so that he refuses to let this type of horrendous evil reproduce.

abuse. How does God ultimately crush his enemies and bring evil to its knees? He does it by defeating it with its own tools.

So even though this is the cry of the heart of these broken yet hopeful Israelites, and God will answer the prayers, there's not necessarily proof in scripture that that the Babylonians, all of their children died this way, and that's, that was God's justice.

[32 : 20] Instead he defeats the Babylonians with their own tools. What do I mean? We get a glimpse of it in Jeremiah 29. It's a very famous passage.

If you know Jeremiah 29, you might even have a fridge magnet with verse 11 on it somewhere in your house, or just buried in a box somewhere. Very popular.

What does it say? For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. It's actually a beautiful passage, but there's more to it, okay? There's more to it.

And this is what it says, if you go down to verse 4 of Jeremiah 29, thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

Okay? Interestingly, it's God who is, he is saying, I'm the one who sent you. Okay, nevertheless, verse 5, build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their produce, take wives and have sons and daughters and take wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage that they may bear sons and daughters, multiply there.

[33 : 26] Where is the there? It's in Babylon. And do not decrease. Verse 7, but seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on its behalf for its welfare and you will find your welfare.

Welfare, again, is just peace. It's shalom. Work for the shalom of the city. Verse 10, for thus says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place.

Verse 11, the famous verse, for I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

Verse 12, then you will call upon me and I will come. Sorry, then you will call upon me and come and pray to me and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the Lord. And I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you in to exile.

[34 : 40] Here's the thing. Like an anti-venom given to a body that has suffered a snake bite, how does God totally upend Babylon?

Okay? By humiliating them. Not by killing their children. Okay? But by taking the very people that they sought to humiliate, planting them in the city that is the center of your empire, and there they start practicing the one true faith, worshiping the one true God who is not limited to Jerusalem, they

turn Babylon into Jerusalem.

And all of a sudden, Babylon starts to become more peaceful. And welfare becomes a critical aspect of what it means to be Babylonian.

And what's interesting in all of this, and Persia came and took over Babylon, Babylon ceased to be an empire. But almost from the beginning, almost from the beginning, after Christ's ascension within the first hundred years of the church, the gospel goes to Babylon.

And people start to believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And to this day, and I've met some, not many, because they're persecuted horribly by Islam in Iraq and in the neighboring areas, but I have met Chaldean Christians.

[36 : 12] Okay? Babylonian Christians. So what does God do ultimately to his enemies? If they will but repent and turn to him, they will make them, he will make them his children.

How does this come about? Ultimately, Christ, God, the Son of God, comes down to earth, takes upon himself human form, and he is dashed upon the rock, isn't he?

He is utterly crushed. He suffers with great indignity. He is laid bare. He is laid bare. He is brought down to his foundation.

He dies upon a Roman cross, and in the same way that God humiliates Babylon with Babylon's own tools, God defeats death by death itself.

It is a remarkable thing to consider, how God deals with his foes. On the cross, Christ undoes death, defeats death by death.

[37 : 28] Only Jesus resists Babylon all the way to the end. He is the embodiment of Jerusalem himself, the very presence of God amongst his people.

And then we see that Jesus, he brings justice. And he brings justice in a way that is so unbelievably remarkable. At the end of the age, Revelation chapter 18, it says that Babylon, and again, it's this symbol of Babylon, Babylon will be no more.

Six times Babylon, no more. Your craftsmen, no more. Your leaders, no more. No more, no more, no more. More. But that's not where Revelation ends.

The Revelation of Jesus, it ends with the new Jerusalem coming down. Okay? And it's this wonderful picture that at the end of the age, not Babylon, but Jerusalem will endure.

Friends, resist by God's strength Babylon. But more than that, remember Jerusalem. Remember Jerusalem.

[38 : 39] Remember that if you are in Christ, you are a citizen of the heavenly city now. Resist the call to be a Babylonian. Friends, we have a PR status here in Babylon.

But let us never become citizens. Let us trust in Christ. The true embodiment of the heavenly city.