

We Sat Down and Wept

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But many people wondered why they should trade Babylon for a dangerous journey with religious fanatics like Ezra and Nehemiah, back to a difficult land inhabited by difficult people and to face difficult circumstances.

[4 : 5 3] And so most Israelites, once relocated to Babylonia, simply stayed there. And I dare say that in time the local people referred to them as well-adjusted citizens, pillars of the community and so on, provincials and rustics who had seen the light and had embraced high culture enthusiastically.

Because we must not imagine that the Babylonians themselves saw this business of exile as anything other than just and benevolent behavior.

It's always been a tendency of imperial power and high civilization through the ages to trumpet loudly its virtue and its godlike grace, even while engaging in the most brutal and oppressive acts imaginable.

Before the Babylonians got going, the Assyrians did this. King Sennacherib's delegate, standing before the gates of Jerusalem in 701 BC, had the following to say to the inhabitants of the city, recorded in 2 Kings 18, Make peace with me and come out to me, then every one of you will eat from his own vine and fig tree and drink from his cistern, until I come and take you to a land like your own, a land of grain and new wine, a land of bread and vineyards, a land of olive trees and honey.

Trust me, he says. I'm doing you a favor. You don't want to stay here in this city. Let me help by taking you to a new promised land.

[6 : 3 3] The Assyrians did it, the Babylonians did it, and after them the Persians, the Greeks and the Romans did it. And our own recent and present world history is full of vicious leaders presenting themselves as the fathers of their people, oppressors presenting themselves as liberators, cultured people who proclaim the good life while inhabiting and embracing a culture of death.

It's always been this way, and it is this way with the Babylonians. Notice in your text their demand of the Israelites in verse 3.

Give us songs of joy. Sing us one of the songs of Zion. Party, you people. You're on the way to the promised land.

Get rid of those negative vibes. Get with the program. We are marching to utopia. Don't look back. Look forwards. It's a very, very seductive invitation.

Embraced by many people. It was that way back in ancient Israel. It was exactly the same in New Testament times as the early Christians struggled to work out how to live the kingdom of God while also living in the Roman Empire.

[7 : 57] Because the early apostles commanded these Christians to live as if they were exiles in a foreign land and to remember that they were not yet at home in God's kingdom.

And in fact, these early Christian apostles portrayed the Roman Empire, the glorious and wonderful Roman Empire, to be a kind of Babylon. opulent and yet apostate and brutal and to be resisted to the death.

We read a bit of that in Revelation. We find similar sentiments in 1 Peter and Hebrews. The early Christians knew about this stuff.

And the seduction of Babylon lives on. We feel it too, as we live out our daily lives in a world that offers us so much, if only we will buy into its vision of reality and forget who we are.

We too hear this urgent demand, sing us songs of joy. And we find our passion diminished to obey the command to live like exiles in a strange land.

[9 : 15] And for these reasons, we need to give attention to this psalm. Because Psalm 137 hints at three spiritual disciplines that will help us to stay on the pilgrim path as the people of God and avoid wandering off it.

I summarize these disciplines in the traditional alliterative way as follows, remembering resistance and reality in prayer.

Remembering resistance and reality in prayer. What was it that led the psalmist in Psalm 137 and those who were like him to notice not the prosperity of Babylon, not the abundance of water, not the high culture, of their new surroundings, but to notice rather that this was not home?

How was it that these people took such a different view of things when so many were bedazzled and bewitched by the glories of their surroundings? How was it that these people retained their understanding of life as a journey when so many people had come to think of having arrived already at their destination?

The most fundamental answer to that question is a very simple one. They remembered. They remembered. And memory, rather than sight or touch, shaped their thinking.

[11 : 01] They remembered who they were. They remembered. They remembered where they had come from and where they were going. They remembered what Babylon and her allies really stood for beneath the veneer of sophistication and civilization that was being presented daily to their senses.

Our psalm tells us in verse 1. They remembered Zion. They remembered Jerusalem. What Jerusalem stood for. In the Old Testament, Zion, or Jerusalem, is the central focal point of God's redemptive purposes.

It's where the name of God is. It's where God, if God lives anywhere, in a sense, lives there. That's where he is. And these people remembered.

In fact, we're told in verses 5 and 6, they committed themselves never to forget. Never to forget that their highest joy remained outside their current circumstances and would not be found in their current situation.

You will notice from these verses, by the way, that it is a very fierce commitment to remember. And the reason is because the danger of forgetting is so real.

[12 : 22] And so we note that the psalmist pronounces curses on his own hand or tongue if he should forget. In other words, he invites inability of action and speech if his actions and speech are not consistent with his faith and do not reflect where his treasure lies.

The fierceness of words about this kind of thing is not confined, of course, to the Old Testament. Remember Jesus' own fierce words in Matthew chapter 6 about remembering where our treasure lies because where our treasure is, there will our heart be also.

And remember his even scarier words on what it takes to be a disciple, words which echo this psalm. He tells his disciples they must be ready to sacrifice eye, foot, or hand to cut them out and off.

Whatever is important if by keeping these things we are led into sin. Very, very fierce words because discipleship is a serious business and remembering is essential and fundamental to discipleship.

And that's why the whole Bible has so much to say about remembering as a spiritual discipline. a discipline to be practiced individually on a daily basis through prayer and reflection on Scripture.

[13 : 57] A discipline to be practiced corporately and regularly in our families as we encourage each other to put the kingdom of God first.

A discipline which we ourselves as a gathered group on a Sunday practice as we listen to God's word and celebrate the sacraments. In doing all of this we remember who we are we remember where we've been and where we're going and we help each other to remember these things.

This puts us in a very good position secondly to resist the second of our spiritual disciplines. The psalmist and his friends in remembering Zion see clearly how to live in their present circumstances.

Here we have their captors inviting them to forget themselves and their pain and to party. Remembering reality though and in the midst of much weeping the exiles are able to resist and what they do is very interesting.

They find the nearest trees and they hang up upon them their harps retiring them for the foreseeable future. A gesture of defiance and of civil disobedience.

[15 : 22] You want music they say? Go climb a tree. Because they realize that weeping is a far more appropriate response to their situation than partying.

That the brutality and desolation of their recent and present experience should not and could not be glossed over as if it had never happened. As if the very foundations of civilized Babylonian culture were not themselves stained in blood.

They realize that the demand for entertainment at such a time and in such a place is an affront to decency and to God. Perhaps they also realized the importance even for their captors of not capitulating to a false worldview but of keeping alive a different version of reality.

A truthful story that someday someday might subvert and undermine the false stories told in that powerful and upbeat culture.

Perhaps they grasped that they must keep a story alive to help other people also understand the darkness of what they thought of as paradise.

[16 : 41] And so they hung up their hearts. They refused to play along. They resisted rather like Daniel and his friends resisted. That great narrative example of what respectful resistance to the empire means for the believing person and indeed of all the good that it can achieve because Daniel and his friends you remember suffered but their suffering changed empires.

So did the suffering of the early Christians. You might put it this way that resisting is not something to be done just for our own good. Resisting false consciousness is something we do because we also love our neighbors.

remembering and resisting in our case by proclaiming and living the subversive gospel story in the midst of our own dominant cultural stories and by refusing to laugh when we should weep.

And finally to remembering and resisting must be added the final discipline of the psalm. Reality in prayer. We are not if truth be told beings to whom honesty comes very easily especially in prayer.

Our public prayers betray too often a desire to please other people and to disguise our true selves from them. Our private prayers betray too often the attempt to achieve much the same before God.

[18 : 16] Perhaps that is partly why we find the gut-wrenching and raw final verses of this psalm so very shocking. Perhaps that is why they are so often omitted from prayer books and lectionaries including by the way the prayer book in your pew.

If you turn up Psalm 137 you will find the last stanza just plainly missing. These verses are not respectable enough for church.

They are not respectable enough for God. And our tongues resist and struggle with the words that follow them in public reading. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Although there was perhaps less mumbling of that at this service than there was at nine o'clock. In truth we say thanks be to God but actually we'd be much happier and more thankful if these words were not there at all.

But of course we might be more thankful we would not be better off because we need their challenge. We need their challenge to our respectability.

[19 : 28] We need their challenge to our dishonesty. We need their challenge to our disinterest in justice. Our aptness to ignore the suffering of the innocent and to trivialize the crimes committed against them because we are too indulgent of their perpetrators.

As Eugene Peterson once put it, dishonesty in prayer is already rampant enough without assist from bleeding heart editors.

The Hebrew editors who selected the psalm for our praying were a tougher breed. They included the third stanza of psalm 137 deliberately and with good reason.

the life of prayer carries us into difficult country, a country in which we become aware that evil is far more extensive than anything we ever guessed, where malignity has worked its way perversely and deeply into the world's ways.

It is indeed the depths of evil in the world and the corresponding great need for justice that these final verses of our psalm concern.

[20 : 44] The children of the daughter of Babylon, that is the Babylonians as a people, their city conceived of as the mother of her children. These Babylonians have ravaged the land of Palestine, they have massacred people of all ages.

They have been treacherously helped in this by Israel's neighbors, the Edomites, who are mentioned in the psalm. And so these exiles have not only left a land behind them, they have also left their dead behind them.

And the psalmist expresses the hope that these horrendous crimes will not be forgotten, because there's a real danger they will in the world in which they actually live.

And so as he strives to remember Zion always, he prays that God at least will remember Babylon's victims and that justice will be done.

There should be some kind of fitting and appropriate punishment for these crimes. And it's graphically suggested to us in verse 9 in the image of the dashing of Babylon's children or Babylon's people against the rocks.

[22 : 03] As I dare say, the psalmist had in his mind the dashing of more literal Israelite children against the rocks of Jerusalem. This is a prayer that refuses to dismiss wickedness to the margins of things.

It's a prayer that refuses to be dishonest about what lies in the heart. it's a prayer uttered in total disregard for what spectators may think about it and how they may sit in judgment on it.

And in all these respects, it is, I suggest, a model prayer. I don't say that it represents everything to be said about Christian prayer, but in any case, you're never going to learn everything that needs to be known about anything from one text.

The Bible as a whole encourages us, of course, to be as interested in redemption of our enemies as in the question of justice.

Somehow, we are to love our enemies even while not allowing their crimes to go unnoticed and not allowing the voices of their victims to go unheard.

[23 : 23] And we're asked to do all of those things at the same time. And that is not easy. The psalm clearly does not say everything about prayer.

It does not make here explicit space for transformation as an alternative to judgment. But the psalm does say something about prayer, and the something is important.

It urges us to deal with reality in prayer, and to avoid pretense. Pretense about the world, pretense about ourselves, and pretense about God.

And these things are extremely important. Because prayer that does not deal in reality is not truly prayer at all.

And it cannot help us in our own pursuit of reality, and in our rejection of the false consciousness of Babylon. If we stop dealing with God in the midst of the reality of the world, in the midst of the reality of what's in our own hearts, if we start pretending, if we stop looking for justice, and stop addressing God directly about the lack of justice in the world, then very soon we shall stop dealing with reality and with God at all.

[24 : 52] We shall inhabit only illusion and delusion. Our religion will become escapist and cozy, the product only of a subculture, all too easily adjustable to the favorite ideology of the moment, and our prayers will become middle class, smug, and self-serving.

reality in prayer, like remembering and resisting, is fundamental to biblical spirituality for this reason.

But the Bible teaches us that God prefers flawed friends who are honest and passionate to respectable friends who are neither of these things.

And that's another difficult lesson that Jesus taught us. three disciplines from this psalm for the pilgrim caught up in what we might call the great biblical tale of two cities, the movement from Babylon to Jerusalem.

We must remember, we must resist, we must deal in reality when we pray. And we need to encourage each other to practice these disciplines and to help each other on the pilgrim way, because the pilgrim way is difficult, Babylon is all around us, and we need not only God's help, but each other's help if we are to progress safely along this narrow path and come safely to the end of the journey.

[26 : 26] Amen. This digital audio file, along with many others, is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org.

That address is www.stjohns.org.

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Thanks for listening. See you next time! Bye! Cheers, ■■■■■! Thank you!

Bye!