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**Psalm 137:1-8, New Living Translation**

- <sup>1</sup> *Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept  
as we thought of Jerusalem.*
- <sup>2</sup> *We put away our harps,  
hanging them on the branches of poplar trees.*
- <sup>3</sup> *For our captors demanded a song from us.  
Our tormentors insisted on a joyful hymn:  
“Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!”*
- <sup>4</sup> *But how can we sing the songs of the LORD  
while in a pagan land?*
- <sup>5</sup> *If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand forget how to play the harp.*
- <sup>6</sup> *May my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth  
if I fail to remember you,  
if I don’t make Jerusalem my greatest joy.*
- <sup>7</sup> *O LORD, remember what the Edomites did  
on the day the armies of Babylon captured Jerusalem.  
“Destroy it!” they yelled.  
“Level it to the ground!”*
- <sup>8</sup> *O Babylon, you will be destroyed.  
Happy is the one who pays you back  
for what you have done to us.*

**The pain of vengeance.**

Most of the Psalms are very difficult to date. They were passed on orally for several hundred years – at least – before they were written down, probably

beginning in the sixth century B.C. They were written as prayers and songs, and they formed the Israelite Temple hymn book. They tell the story of Israel's history from the time of Moses to the return from exile in Babylon. The word Psalm is derived from a Greek translation of a Hebrew word that means "a song sung to the accompaniment of a plucked instrument".

The Psalms were used heavily by the early Christians, and they are heavily referenced in the New Testament. Thus, they have had a dramatic impact on Christian theology. Almost a third of the Psalms are considered "laments", mostly complaints by individuals or complaints by the Israelites as a community. Some are pleas for a release from hardship. Other Psalms simply praise God. There are Psalms that offer up confidence and trust in God. Some offer thanksgiving. There are Psalms that tell about the lives of Israel's kings. Others are wisdom poems.

The Psalm we are looking at today, 137, is a lament, although it tells a story after the fact. It was written after the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon; it is one of the few Psalms that can be reliably dated. We looked at the exile of the Israelites in Babylon in an earlier sermon. They were marched through the desert 700 miles as the crow flies, but actually far longer by the path that they took, because they had to go around a range of hills. In this Psalm, they have returned

to find Jerusalem in ruins, the Temple destroyed. The writer is bitter, lashing out at the Babylonians and the allies of the Babylonians, the Edomites.

A major concern expressed in the Psalm is that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and Edomites should never be forgotten. It is also a Psalm of vengeance, of brutal anger toward an oppressor. The author is bitter, even though the reason that the Israelites were allowed to return to Israel is because the Babylonians had been conquered by the Persian king Cyrus the Great - who then let the Israelites return home - and so the Babylonians have themselves been crushed. But the Babylonians and the Edomites had committed horrible atrocities against the Israelites; many Israelites had been slaughtered.

This Psalm helped propel the name Babylon as the symbol of cultures that deny the existence of God and Israel as the symbol of cultures that believe.

One message of this Psalm is that the first step toward healing is to look deeply at your pain. First, you must remember and accept. Only then can you begin to go on. But there's a special reason why I chose this Psalm. It has to do with the very last verse of the Psalm – which I left out of our quote. Yes, we just heard verses 1 through 8, but there is a 9<sup>th</sup> verse – and it is very disturbing.

But before we talk about that, I'd like to talk about someone I met while serving as a hospital chaplain. I was given a referral to visit a man in the intensive

care unit. The man was in his mid-thirties. He was a heroin addict who had contracted AIDS, I think by sharing needles. His life was in danger. A nurse warned me that he was manipulative and angry. He also wasn't completely rational, she told me. He was like an angry, spoiled child, she said.

The room was dim, and it took me a couple of minutes to adapt to the darkness. Since he was lying there motionless, I assumed that he was asleep. But as my eyes adjusted, I realized that he was awake – and he was looking right at me. He was tall, with stringy, long brown hair.

“Hi,” I said, “my name is Buzz. I’m a chaplain.”

“You’re a chaplain?” he said, and his eyes searched my face.

“Yes.”

“Maybe you can help me,” he said.

“How can I help you?” I said.

“It’s my father and stepmother. I need help,” he said.

Even though he was weak, it didn't take much to get him talking. He immediately started telling me that his father and his stepmother had cheated him. They had thrown him out of his condo, he said, a condo that his father had bought and had promised would be his. But now, when he got out of the hospital, he wouldn't have anywhere to go. It was the stepmother who had

brainwashed his father, convincing him to keep the condo for themselves so that they could rent it out for big money. Real estate in Boulder is expensive, you know, he told me, and so they had thrown him out so they could rent it.

Chaplains aren't psychologists. We mostly listen. We're patient, calm people who have the time to just sit there and let people talk about whatever they want to talk about. Some folks just want to chat, often because they don't have much of a support structure outside the hospital and nobody visits them. Some people dive into the story of their medical journey. Others tell the chaplain their lives. I have heard some amazing stories. Sometimes, you get someone who is deeply embittered and is looking to deflect their pain onto someone other than them self. Often it has nothing to do with the reason they are in the hospital.

Like this young man who was extremely sick, with failing kidneys and a dangerous case of sepsis, and who seemed to be forty pounds underweight. He went on and on about his father and his stepmother. He blamed them for his mother's death from cancer, his younger brother's suicide, and most of all, for cheating him out of his nice, fancy Boulder condo. He was going to have to go live in the shelter in north Boulder when he got out of the hospital, he said, and neither his father nor his stepmother cared. They had abandoned him. They didn't want to have anything to do with him. They just wanted rent money.

“I’d like to shoot them both,” he said angrily, then his eyes closed. He’d worn himself out.

We were both silent for a moment. I took his hand. Then his eyes opened.

He spoke shakily, but desperately: “Can you help me get my condo back? You’re a chaplain. You can help me, can’t you? The police would believe you.”

He went on and on like this, trying to enlist me to somehow be his spokesman with the cops, as if a chaplain and the cops could get back what he thought was his rightful inheritance. He was going to get out of the hospital and have no home, he kept saying, because of his father and stepmother.

He had a lament, like that psalmist who was going home after a terrifying struggle, only to find the Temple burned and the city destroyed.

I stood there, by his bed, holding his bony hand, wondering what I was going to say to him. I knew that I was going to have to tell him that I couldn’t try to get the cops to get his condo back. I thought that perhaps I could ask him if he had any paperwork, any document that said that the condo was supposed to be his. I suspected there was never any true commitment to give him the condo.

Then he repeated that he wanted to kill his father and his stepmother. There was no much anger in his voice. So much bitterness. He sounded so cruel.

I want to re-read the last few verses of our Psalm, but this time, without leaving out the last verse:

O LORD, remember what the Edomites did  
on the day the armies of Babylon captured Jerusalem.  
“Destroy it!” they yelled.  
“Level it to the ground!”

<sup>8</sup>O Babylon, you will be destroyed.  
Happy is the one who pays you back  
for what you have done to us.

<sup>9</sup>***Happy is the one who takes your babies  
and smashes them against the rocks!***

Imagine.... Someone who is so embittered, so angry at the Babylonians for taking many thousands of Israelites prisoner, marching them far from their home, and then while they were away, destroying their homes and their Temple. The Babylonians did cruel things when they invaded Israel. They blinded people. They looted. They killed adults. They killed children. And so, in revenge, the psalmist wants to take the children of the Babylonians and smash them against the rocks.

There have been a handful of ways that Bible scholars have tried to explain away this vicious line in Psalm 137. It was symbolic, they said. The Babylonians had robbed the Israelites of their future, and by saying they wanted to kill the Babylonian’s children, they were saying that the Babylonians deserved to have their future – symbolized by their children – destroyed. Or maybe they were

saying that there would be another generation of evil Babylonians when their children grew up to be soldiers, so why not just kill them now? Or perhaps saying they wanted to kill children was just a way of releasing the pain they felt inside. They weren't serious about doing it. But nothing can deny the horrible bitterness the psalmist must have lived with every moment of every day.

In the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 11, Verse 25, Jesus tells us: *When you are praying, first forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will forgive your sins, too.*

I never had to tell that young man in the ICU that I couldn't talk to the cops for him and get his condo back for him. He wore himself out telling me over and over how he hated his father and his stepmother, and how he blamed them for every bad thing that had happened to him – including his drug addiction. You see, he finally passed out in mid-sentence. His hand went limp in mine and I stood there for a moment in the dark, looking at him. Then I left.

You know what I discovered out in the hall? An older couple. I didn't even have to ask who they were. Yes, his father and his stepmother. They were standing outside his room, holding hands, looking terribly strained. The ICU rooms have sliding glass doors that seal the rooms tightly, and I remember hoping that they hadn't heard what their son had been saying.



“The nurse said that you were a chaplain,” said the father, “so we didn’t want to go in and disturb you.”

“He’s asleep,” I told them.

I was thankful they didn’t ask me what their son and I had talked about.

Like the Old Testament psalmist, that patient in the ICU could not let go of his bitterness. It drove the author of the Psalm to say he wanted to kill children. It drove the sick man to say he wanted to kill his parents. As Christians, though, we work to keep our minds and souls healthy. One way we do this is by never letting bitterness fester inside us.

“How’s he doing?” asked the young man’s father.

“He’s very sick. He’s not rational,” I said, trying to prepare them.

“We know,” said the stepmother. “It’s okay. We know.”

I slid the door open for them. I asked God to heal the heart of this young man and help him realize that his parents were there because they loved him.

Just before walking into that room, the stepmother – who clearly considered herself to be that young man’s mother – seemed to read my mind.

“It’s okay that he blames us,” she said, “For some reason, it’s brought the two of us closer and that’s given us some joy.”

That’s what God wants from us. To rise above our pain and find joy.