

## By the Waters of Babylon

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Psalm 137 begins by the waters of Babylon in a forlorn and lonely place (v1). Though the author of the Psalm is unknown, the situation is clear: the people of God are in exile in Babylon. The water refers not to the Jordan, but to the Euphrates River, or one of its tributaries. There, on the banks of that foreign river, the people sat and wept in remembrance of Zion. Their beloved city Jerusalem lay in ruins, and with it their beloved temple. Exiled in a foreign land, these singers were overwhelmed with lament for the loss of that precious place where they met with God; his footstool on earth and promised location of his presence among them. To make matters worse, their tormentors – the conquering Babylonians – mocked them by calling on these trained musicians to play them a song (v3). And not just any song: a song of Zion, one of their Psalms written for holy worship in the temple. The singers refused, and in stubborn revolt and single-minded devotion to their God, they hung up their instruments in the branches of the surrounding trees (v2).

For these mourning children of God who were exiled from his house, to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land would be an act of betrayal and treachery (v4). The pure worship of their God was not to be treated as cheap entertainment, and to treat it that way would be to run the risk of forgetting Jerusalem altogether (v5). Even in the despair of exile, these saints refused to make an alternative for temple worship, but determined to set Jerusalem above their highest joy (v6). Their time in exile – no matter how long it lasted – was to be a time marked by lament and sadness. They were to go about their lives as best they could, to build houses and plant gardens (Jeremiah 29:5), all the while feeding the fire of lament in their hearts that threatened to be snuffed out by worldly contentment. And though the absence of true worship brought sorrow to their heart, they steadfastly refused to take the edge off the pain with any substitute, no matter how close it came to the real thing. In the words of the scribe, it was “a time to mourn” – and until it was time to return, that mourning was to flavor and infuse their days in exile.

Today, during the Coronavirus pandemic, the church is experiencing a taste of that exile. For us, the thousands of empty buildings every Sunday are like unto the destroyed temple. Of course it is not the building that we miss, but the assembly of God's people. Thankfully, we still meet as families and sing and pray in our homes with the blessing of God's outpoured Spirit. For in the era of the Spirit, a closed church door does not mean a closed door to God, for we worship him by spirit and truth (John 4:24). And yet despite the joy of this unfettered access, there remains a deep void in our lives over the loss of gathered worship with our covenant church community. The congregation of God gathered together for worship is the greatest expression we have in this life of the kingdom of God, and joining that worship is our highest calling as God's children. Next to the loss of life itself, the most devastating effect of this pandemic has been and continues to be the loss of weekly public worship with the saints.

So what do our Sundays look like in this foreign land? They are still days of worship and rest, but a worship and rest that are flavored with lament. We certainly enjoy the presence God by the power of his word and Spirit when we gather with our families to read, pray, and sing. Personal and family worship are given by God to sustain us, maybe now more than ever, and this is a time to recommit to these simpler paths of Christian formation and discipleship. But through it all we must resolve to lament; to give voice to the desire for gathering with the saints for corporate worship.

Whatever we do as a church for our flock on the Lord's Day, no matter how creative the approach or proficient the technology, it is a far cry from God-honoring, Christ-exalting, Spirit-driven corporate worship. While we should be grateful for the connections that technology provides, it must not dull the godly ache we feel for worship with the saints. In fact it may be through technology that our enemy whispers lies in our ears that, if we are not careful, will lead us to forget Jerusalem. For if we settle for the substitute to dull our pain, pretty soon the ache will disappear altogether and we will grow sinfully content in this foreign land.

What does this mean for us during this pandemic? It means that we will mourn, and keep mourning, until by the mercy of God we are restored. Like the exiled Israelites, we resolve to lament. We refuse to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land and instead sit down and weep, and keep weeping until this is over. We can be thankful for technology, while simultaneously mourning the need for it and refusing to let it fill the void left by the absence of corporate worship. And we as church leaders must be careful not to construct an alternative to public worship that is so good that it masks this godly ache.

This doesn't mean that we must walk around with glum faces all day, but let us acknowledge the reality for what it is. We are not on an extended vacation when we just get to hang out and enjoy church in our pajamas. Nor is this some focused period of intense productivity for us to accomplish all we ever wanted to without the distractions of life. No. This is a time of unsettled days and restless nights, of stressful decisions and stifling inactivity. Of fear and mourning, isolation and anxiety, purposelessness and helplessness. And on the very day, and in the very activity, established by God to feed our souls and restore our hearts, we have nowhere to go but to the banks of the waters of Babylon.

So as we all adjust to new schedules, routines, and social habits, I say simply this from Psalm 137: resolve to lament. Now is the time to mourn the absence of gathered worship. In Christ we are able to rejoice in suffering, but as we grasp him by faith alone we do not deny the reality of suffering, nor treat it with any other antidote but the gospel. Lament deeply, so deeply that it might fuel your prayers for mercy and focus your hopes on Christ. One day soon he will restore us to church, just as one day soon he will restore us to heavenly glory, so draw near to Christ in faith today, and he will surely draw near to you.