

PSALM 137

There are divers psalms which are thought to have been penned in the latter days of the Jewish church, when prophecy was near expiring and the canon of the Old Testament ready to be closed up, but none of them appears so plainly to be of a late date as this, which was penned when the people of God were captives in Babylon, and there insulted over by these proud oppressors; probably it was towards the latter end of their captivity; for now they saw the destruction of Babylon hastening on apace (v. 8), which would be their discharge. It is a mournful psalm, a lamentation; and the Septuagint makes it one of the lamentations of Jeremiah, naming him for the author of it. Here

I. The melancholy captives cannot enjoy themselves (v. 1, 2).

II. They cannot humour their proud oppressors (v. 3, 4).

III. They cannot forget Jerusalem (v. 5, 6).

IV. They cannot forgive Edom and Babylon (v. 7-9). In singing this psalm we must be much affected with the concernments of the church, especially that part of it that is in affliction, laying the sorrows of God's people near our hearts, comforting ourselves in the prospect of the deliverance of the church and the ruin of its enemies, in due time, but carefully avoiding all personal animosities, and not mixing the leaven of malice with our sacrifices.

<BDE> PSALM 137:1-6

THE SORROWS OF CAPTIVITY

We have here the daughter of Zion covered with a cloud, and dwelling with the daughter of Babylon; the people of God in tears, but sowing in tears. Observe,

I. The mournful posture they were in as to their affairs and as to their spirits.

1. They were posted *by the rivers of Babylon*, in a strange land, a great

way from their own country, whence they were brought as prisoners of war. The land of Babylon was now a house of bondage to that people, as Egypt had been in their beginning. Their conquerors quartered them *by the rivers*, with design to employ them there, and keep them to work in their galleys; or perhaps they chose it as the most melancholy place, and therefore most suitable to their sorrowful spirits. If they must build houses there (²⁹¹⁵Jeremiah 29:5), it shall not be in the cities, the places of concourse, but by the rivers, the places of solitude, where they might mingle their tears with the streams. We find some of them by the *river Chebar* (³⁰⁰³Ezekiel 1:3), others by the *river Ulai*, (²⁰⁰²Daniel 8:2).

2. There they *sat down* to indulge their grief by poring on their miseries. Jeremiah had taught them under this yoke to *sit alone*, and *keep silence*, and *put their mouths in the dust*, (²⁹²⁸Lamentations 3:28, 29). “We sat down, as those that expected to stay, and were content, since it was the will of God that it must be so.”

3. Thoughts of Zion drew tears from their eyes; and it was not a sudden passion of weeping, such as we are sometimes put into by a trouble that surprises us, but they were deliberate tears (*we sat down and wept*), tears with consideration — *we wept when we remembered Zion*, the holy hill on which the temple was built. Their affection to God's house swallowed up their concern for their own houses. They remembered Zion's former glory and the satisfaction they had had in Zion's courts, (²⁹⁰⁷Lamentations 1:7). *Jerusalem remembered, in the days of her misery, all her pleasant things which she had in the days of old*, (³⁹⁰⁴Psalms 42:4). They remembered Zion's present desolations, and *favoured the dust thereof*, which was a good sign that the time for God to favour it was not far off, (³⁹²³Psalms 102:13, 14).

4. They laid by their instruments of music (v. 2): *We hung our harps upon the willows*.

(1.) The harps they used for their own diversion and entertainment. These they laid aside, both because it was their judgment that they ought not to use them now that God called to weeping and mourning (³⁹²²Isaiah 22:12), and their spirits were so sad that they had no hearts to use them; they brought their harps with them, designing perhaps to use them for the alleviating of their grief, but it proved so great that it would not admit the experiment. Music makes some people melancholy. *As vinegar upon nitre, so is he that sings songs to a heavy heart*.

(2.) The harps they used in God's worship, the Levites' harps. These they did not throw away, hoping they might yet again have occasion to use them, but they laid them aside because they had no present use for them; God had cut them out other work by *turning their feasting into mourning and their songs into lamentations*, ^{<3180>}Amos 8:10. Every thing is beautiful in its season. They did not hide their harps in the bushes, or the hollows of the rocks; but hung them up in view, that the sight of them might affect them with this deplorable change. Yet perhaps they were faulty in doing this; for praising God is never out of season; it is his will that we should *in every thing give thanks*, ^{<2945>}Isaiah 24:15, 16.

II. The abuses which their enemies put upon them when they were in this melancholy condition, v. 3. They had *carried them away captive* from their own land and then *wasted them* in the land of their captivity, took what little they had from them. But this was not enough; to complete their woes they insulted over them: They *required of us mirth and a song*. Now,

1. This was very barbarous and inhuman; even an enemy, in misery, is to be pitied and not trampled upon. It argues a base and sordid spirit to upbraid those that are in distress either with their former joys or with their present griefs, or to challenge those to be merry who, we know, are out of tune for it. This is adding affliction to the afflicted.

2. It was very profane and impious. No songs would serve them but the *songs of Zion*, with which God had been honoured; so that in this demand they reflected upon God himself as Belshazzar, when he drank wine in temple-bowls. Their enemies *mocked at their sabbaths*, ^{<2107>}Lamentations 1:7.

III. The patience wherewith they bore these abuses, v. 4. They had laid by their harps, and would not resume them, no, not to ingratiate themselves with those at whose mercy they lay; they would not answer those fools according to their folly. Profane scoffers are not to be humoured, nor pearls cast before swine. David prudently *kept silence even from good* when the *wicked were before him*, who, he knew, would ridicule what he said and make a jest of it, ^{<3113>}Psalms 39:1, 2. The reason they gave is very mild and pious: *How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*

They do not say, "How shall we sing when we are so much in sorrow?" If that had been all, they might perhaps have put a force upon themselves so far as to oblige their masters with a song; but "It is the *Lord's song*; it is a sacred thing; it is peculiar to the temple-service, and therefore we dare not

sing it in the land of a stranger, among idolaters.” We must not serve common mirth, much less profane mirth, with any thing that is appropriated to God, who is sometimes to be honoured by a religious silence as well as by religious speaking.

IV. The constant affection they retained for Jerusalem, the city of their solemnities, even now that they were in Babylon. Though their enemies banter them for talking so much of Jerusalem, and even doting upon it, their love to it is not in the least abated; it is what they may be jeered for, but will never be jeered out of, v. 5, 6. Observe,

1. How these pious captives stood affected to Jerusalem.

(1.) Their heads were full of it. It was always in their minds; they remembered it; they did not forget it, though they had been long absent from it; many of them had never seen it, nor knew any thing of it but by report, and by what they had read in the scripture, yet it was graven upon the palms of their hands, and even its ruins were continually before them, which was an evidence of their faith in the promise of its restoration in due time. In their daily prayers they opened their windows towards Jerusalem; and how then could they forget it?

(2.) Their hearts were full of it. They *preferred* it *above* their *chief joy*, and therefore they remembered it and could not forget it. What we love we love to think of. Those that rejoice in God do, for his sake, make Jerusalem their joy, and prefer it before that, whatever it is, which is the head of their joy, which is dearest to them in this world. A godly man will prefer a public good before any private satisfaction or gratification whatsoever.

2. How steadfastly they resolved to keep up this affection, which they express by a solemn imprecation of mischief to themselves if they should let it fall: “Let me be for ever disabled either to sing or play on the harp if I so far forget the religion of my country as to make use of my songs and harps for the pleasing of Babylon's sons or the praising of Babylon's gods. *Let my right hand forget her art*” (which the hand of an expert musician never can, unless it be withered), “*nay, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth*, if I have not a good word to say for Jerusalem wherever I am.” Though they dare not sing Zion's songs among the Babylonians, yet they cannot forget them, but, as soon as ever the present restraint is taken off, they will sing them as readily as ever, notwithstanding the long disuse.

PSALM 137:7-9

THE SORROWS OF CAPTIVITY

The pious Jews in Babylon, having afflicted themselves with the thoughts of the ruins of Jerusalem, here please themselves with the prospect of the ruin of her impenitent implacable enemies; but this not from a spirit of revenge, but from a holy zeal for the glory of God and the honour of his kingdom.

I. The Edomites will certainly be reckoned with, and all others that were accessaries to the destruction of Jerusalem, that were aiding and abetting, that *helped forward the affliction* (³⁰¹⁵Zechariah 1:15) and triumphed in it, that *said, in the day of Jerusalem, the day of her judgment, "Raise it, raise it to the foundations; down with it, down with it; do not leave one stone upon another."* Thus they made the Chaldean army more furious, who were already so enraged that they needed no spur. Thus they put shame upon Israel, who would be looked upon as a people worthy to be cut off when their next neighbours had such an ill-will to them. And all this was a fruit of the old enmity of Esau against Jacob, because he got the birthright and the blessing, and a branch of that more ancient enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent: *Lord, remember them*, says the psalmist, which is an appeal to his justice against them. Far be it from us to avenge ourselves, if ever it should be in our power, but we will leave it to him who has said, *Vengeance is mine*. Note, Those that are glad at calamities, especially the calamities of Jerusalem, shall not go unpunished. Those that are confederate with the persecutors of good people, and stir them up, and set them on, and are pleased with what they do, shall certainly be called to an account for it against another day, and God will remember it against them.

II. Babylon is the principal, and it will come to her turn too to drink of the cup of tremblings, the very dregs of it (v. 8, 9): *O daughter of Babylon!* proud and secure as thou art, we know well, by the scriptures of truth, thou *art to be destroyed*, or (as Dr. Hammond reads it) *who art the destroyer*. The destroyers shall be destroyed, (⁶⁶³⁰Revelation 13:10. And perhaps it is with reference to this that the man of sin, the head of the New-Testament Babylon, is called a *son of perdition*, (⁵⁰¹³2 Thessalonians 2:3. The

destruction of Babylon being foreseen as a sure destruction (thou *art to be destroyed*), it is spoken of,

1. As a just destruction. She shall be paid in her own coin: “Thou shalt be served *as thou hast served us*, as barbarously used by the destroyers as we have been by thee,” See ⁶⁸³⁶Revelation 18:6. Let not those expect to find mercy who, when they had power, did not show mercy.

2. As an utter destruction. The very little ones of Babylon, when it is taken by storm, and all in it are put to the sword, shall be dashed to pieces by the enraged and merciless conqueror. None escape if these little ones perish. Those are the seed of another generation; so that, if they be cut off, the ruin will be not only total, as Jerusalem's was, but final. It is sunk like a millstone into the sea, never to rise.

3. As a destruction which should reflect honour upon the instruments of it. Happy shall those be that do it; for they are fulfilling God's counsels; and therefore he calls Cyrus, who did it, his *servant*, his *shepherd*, his *anointed* (²⁴⁴⁸Isaiah 44:28; 45:1), and the soldiers that were employed in it his *sanctified ones*, ²³¹³Isaiah 13:3. They are making way for the enlargement of God's Israel, and happy are those who are in any way serviceable to that. The fall of the New-Testament Babylon will be the triumph of all the saints, ⁶⁸¹¹Revelation 19:1.