

Bible Study
By the Waters of Babylon
by Mesu Andrews

To understand the emotional lament and vengeful outcry of Psalm 137, we must understand the events, the land, and the nations involved. Only hearts crushed completely could ache so deeply. And only our God, who was hurt so deeply, would punish completely—and restore so gloriously. Though sin destroyed and God’s wrath poured out, Mercy built an even greater gift on the ruins.

[By the waters of Babylon]

we sat as exiles, mourning our captivity,

and wept with great love for Zion. (137:1 TPT)

1. Why was Zion (Jerusalem) so important to those who remained faithful to Yahweh? (Leviticus 17:2-4; Deuteronomy 12:5-7)
2. On which piece of Temple furniture did Yahweh choose to manifest His presence? (Exodus 25:22)
3. To glimpse the utter devastation felt by these exiles, we must first absorb the complete *separation* they felt from God. All the “normal” ways of connecting with Him were blocked. Imagine if you could no longer pray or read your Bible. No longer enjoy the fellowship or encouragement of other believers. Consider your current relationship with God and write a line or two about what you would miss most if you were separated from all that is familiar about your worship.

Babylon’s geography was very different than Jerusalem’s. Only the Jordan River flowed through Israel/Judah, no more than a stream in the dry season. The mighty Euphrates River flowed into Babylon, and Nebuchadnezzar’s father had begun a complex system of canals to irrigate the entire province. In Judah, streams only swelled during floods from Mount Hermon’s spring thaw. Jerusalem’s desert soil—full of rocks and sand—limited crops to olives, grapes, barley, wheat, and a few more, but it was *God’s Land* promised to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When the exiles arrived in Babylon, they saw plants and trees they’d never seen before, growing from rich, black soil without *any* rocks. No barley. No grapes. No olive trees. Babylon grew sesame plants for oil, poplar (willow) trees beside the rivers and streams, and date palms for wine.

Our music and mirth were no longer heard, only sadness.

We hung up our harps on the willow trees.

Our captors tormented us, saying, “Make music for us and

sing one of your happy Zion-songs!”

But how could we sing the song of the Lord

in this foreign wilderness? (137:2-4 TPT)

4. Gloating soldiers goaded their captives to sing songs of their decimated homeland. With the last tattered shreds of dignity they possessed, the captives refused. Put yourself in the captives’ sandals. Why would *you* refuse to sing the songs once heard in Yahweh’s Temple?

To a faithful Yahweh worshiper, singing “Zion-songs” in exile would be like *forgetting* Jerusalem. And forgetting Jerusalem would be the same as forgetting Yahweh, since Yahweh and Jerusalem’s Temple were synonymous in their minds.

May my hands never make music again

if I ever forget you, O Jerusalem.

May I never be able to sing again if I fail to honor Jerusalem supremely!” (137:5-6 TPT)

5. What specifically about Jerusalem do you think they are vowing to remember?
- 2 Chronicles 6:6 –
 - Psalm 132:13-18 –
 - Isaiah 44:24-28 –
 - Jeremiah 32:42-44 –
6. Do you think *remembering* is important to God? Why?
- Genesis 9:15-16 –
 - Exodus 12:14 –
 - Exodus 20:8 –
 - Leviticus 23 –
 - Anything else?
7. What is something that the Lord is asking you to commemorate or remember passionately?

The nation of Edom—whose people were the descendants of Esau, Jacob’s twin brother (Gen. 25:19-34)—were among the mercenaries in Babylon’s vast army. History tells us Nebuchadnezzar also used Arabs, Persians, Scythians, Medes, and Syrians to destroy God’s people.

And Lord, may you never forget

what the sons of Edom did to us, saying,

“Let’s raze the city of Jerusalem and burn it to the ground!”

Listen, O Babylon, you evil destroyer!

The one who destroys you will be rewarded above all others.

You will be repaid for what you’ve done to us.

Great honor will come to those who destroy you and your future,

by smashing your infants against the rubble of your own destruction. (137:7-9)

8. The Psalmist just vowed to *never forget* Jerusalem. In the next breath and with equal passion, he asks that Yahweh *never forget* the horrendous things Edom did to God’s people and His holy city. Does God need to be reminded? Of course not, but which heroes of faith reminded God of His character and covenants?
 - Exodus 32:13-14 –
 - 2 Kings 20:3 –
 - 2 Chronicles 6:42 –
 - Nehemiah 1:8-9 –
 - Psalm 25:6-7 –
9. Scriptures offers many examples of faithful men and women who “remind” God of His promises as part of their prayers. What Bible verse(s) can you incorporate into a prayer that reminds both you and the Lord of His faithfulness? (i.e. Romans 8:28)
10. Jeremiah 1:14-15 makes it clear that it was God who summoned the nations to pour out His wrath on Jerusalem. Why then does God punish Edom, Babylon, and the other nations for destroying His people? (Isaiah 10:12; Obadiah 12-13; Habakkuk 2:4-8)
11. When the nations delighted in vengeance and became arrogant in their role as God’s rod of discipline, the Lord turned His wrath on them. Both the Old and New Testaments command us to love our neighbor and pray for our enemies (Lev. 19:17-18; Matt. 5:44). Psalm 83:13-18 is a beautiful prayer expressing both righteous anger and a pure heart. Is there an “enemy” in your life that needs to feel God’s tempest—until they seek His face in repentance and confess that He alone is Most High over all the earth? Ultimately, we—like the Israelites—will witness God’s faithfulness to either judge righteously or forgive lavishly.

As for me, I’m forever grateful for His mercy. Without the redeeming Blood of the Lamb, my eternity would be lost with the Babylonian captors. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, I can come boldly before the Throne of Grace and cry, “Abba!” with full assurance that His dwelling place is within me. (Hebrews 4:16; Galatians 4:6; Romans 8:11)