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Psalm 137

(2019)

Bible House of Grace contains an easy to read New and Old Testament commentary full of spiritual treasures and pearls, complete with an insightful resource guide illuminating God's love and grace.



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Although I believe my aim is pure and God's will perfect this document is still the product of a human man, as to such I neither claim perfect knowledge or perfect understanding.

Psalm 137.

Topics.

- By the waters of Babylon, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
- On the willows there we hung up our lyres and harps.
- The history of Babylon and Israel.
- If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy! Let me forget my skill.
- The Edomites said, "Lay Jerusalem bare, down to its foundations!"
- Edom and the Babylonian captivity.
- Blessed shall He be who dashes your little ones against the rock.

FOR INFORMATION: concerning people, places and the meaning of words see the title: "Map Locations and People of the Bible," and the title: "Bible Dictionary" on Website Menu.

INTRODUCTION

Psalms are songs and prayers offered to God by the nation Israel, they cover the range of human emotion, expressing praise, faith, victory, sorrow, despair, depression, frustration and the troubled heart of a mourner. They contrast the righteous with the wicked, and include the wisdom and the treasure of God's word. Psalms were written at the beginning of the 15th century BC and probably collected in their final form in the 3rd century.

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BOOK FIVE (PSALM 107-150)

PSALM 137:1-3

By the Waters of Babylon, we Wept, when we Remembered Zion.

- **Psalm 137:1-3:** By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. ²On the willows there we hung up our lyres. ³For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

Zion is called God's Holy Mountain because Jerusalem God's Holy city sits on it. At this time Israel is in captivity to the Empire of Babylon and the fierce Babylonian armies have destroyed Jerusalem the beloved city of God's people.

On the willows there we hung up our lyres (v2) the word rendered willows most likely refers to the weeping willow that has long drooping and sagging branches that commonly grow along the banks of rivers. Some say it cannot refer to the willow tree because only the palm tree is found in the region of ancient Babylon but though the willow may be less abundant there now than it was in former times, as the palm tree was once common in Palestine but now rarely grows in the region there is no reason to doubt that willows did grow along the River Euphrates which ran through the midst of Babylon.

Harps: the following verses show that Israel used harps in rejoicing:

- Laban said to Jacob: Why did you flee secretly and trick me, and did not tell me, so that I might have sent you away with mirth(i.e., exceeding gladness, joy and rejoicing) and songs, with tambourine and lyre? (The harp in KJV)) (Gen. 31:27).
- Then they returned, every man of Judah and Jerusalem, and Jehoshaphat at their head, returning to Jerusalem with joy, for the LORD had made them rejoice over their enemies.
28They came to Jerusalem with harps and lyres and trumpets, to the house of the LORD. (2 Chronicles 20:27-28).
- Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy, and I will praise you with the lyre, (the harp in KJV) O God, my God. (Psalm 43:4).

Harps and lyres embrace all the Levites musical instruments and where used by the Levites in temple worship. All musicians greatly value their musical instruments so it is possible that they may have carried them to Babylon in hope of returning with them or to use them to comfort themselves and others while in captivity. It is also likely that the Babylonians themselves took them with the rest of the plunder they took from Jerusalem and are now mockingly bringing out the Levites musical instruments and saying with the intent to defame, insult and mock them, "Now play to us your songs of Zion your songs of gladness and rejoicing," in colloquial language this mocking attitude could be expressed in the following way, "Now we have greatly defeated, humbled and shamed you let's hear you sing your songs of triumph and victory now." In this way they would be rubbing their defeat in their face.

We hanged our harps upon the willows: (v2) this expression could carry the following two ideas:

1. It could be a poetical way of expressing the silence during the exile of all the joyful and festal songs and signifying that they abandoned all signs and means of rejoicing and that they had no heart to sing songs of gladness. Their grief and sorrow were so great it was as if their musical instruments hung upon the weeping willows of Babylon.
2. The Babylonians to add to Israel's woes insultingly and mockingly told them to play their harps and sing songs of Zion and of gladness and rejoicing (see v3), but their musical instruments were as a weeping willow and had no sound of joy within them.

The state of the people of Israel being in captivity highlights the sad state of the backsliding children of God; who have been called out of the world and not to be part of it, but are sometimes overcome with its enticements to temptation and the snares of it and by them are brought again to the captivity of the law of sin and death as the people of Israel were in Babylon a symbol of this world system and of the confusion, wickedness, and idolatry in it. Those seduced by its pleasures sit by the river of Babylon for a while, until they come to themselves and weep over their sins, especially when they reflect upon the joy and gladness they once had in the House of God and their low and miserable condition, because of their own foolish behaviour.

The history of Babylon and Israel: God sent prophet after prophet to warn Judah and Israel of impending doom if they did not change their wicked ways, but they set their hearts diamond hard against the word of God's prophets (Zech. 7:12). The LORD through the faithful prophets told them to surrender themselves to the King of Babylon and God would nurture them while in Babylonian captivity and deliver them. But they continued to rebel against the word of the LORD and turned to other gods and entered into gross sin so the LORD used Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon (who He called His servant (Jer. 25:9) to bring the curses of the covenant upon them. The curses of the covenant are found in (Deut. 28:15-68) and the blessing of the covenant in (Deut. 28:1-14). The fierce armies of Babylon invaded the land of Judah, laid their farm land waste, attacked Jerusalem (the two tribes of Judah) and pillaged the temple. Zedekiah was blinded and carried to Babylon, and the great bulk of the population was taken in chains there with him (around 587 B.C.). Later

Babylon conquered Assyria who had previously taken Israel (the ten tribes in the land of Samaria) captive. They went into captivity to the Empire of Babylon as two rebellious nations who had turned from God to idols and were even sacrificing their own children to pagan gods. They were under Babylonian rule for the next seventy years. Archaeologists have found that all of the cities of Judah were completely destroyed at this time, thus ended the glorious kingdom of David and Solomon. Observers would have said that the Hebrew nation was annihilated, and indeed, the other nations conquered by the Assyrians and Babylonians did cease to exist. But the prophets proclaimed a better hope for the chosen people. "A remnant shall return" Isaiah had said, and in time this remnant, purged and returned, became the basis on which a new Israel would be built.

Now here is the good news: while in captivity God moulded them like a master potter moulds a beautiful clay jar, Israel and Judah went into Babylon as two unfaithful nations that had turned away from the LORD to idols and other gods. Seventy years later, Cyrus (King of Persia) who the LORD called His anointed shepherd (Isaiah 44:28) and took by His right hand (Isaiah 45:1) to conquer the Empire of Babylon gave written permission for Israel to return to Jerusalem. Under Ezra and Nehemiah God brought Israel and Judah back to their beloved city Jerusalem as one united nation faithful to only one God, the LORD their God, the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob (Israel never turned to idols or pagan gods again).

Multitudes of Jewish families who had been scattered throughout the nations returned to Jerusalem and the land of Israel with triumphant joy and rejoicing. When the temple of God was completed their faith was once again established and a golden time of prosperity and peace followed. Sadly, Israel as a nation never recognised their Messiah the Christ when he came, but even this was in the LORD'S sovereign will. The prophet Zechariah tells us when, the Lord returns in glory:

- God will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and pleas for mercy, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn (Zech. 12:10-14).

PSALM 137:4-6

Let Me Forget My Skill if Jerusalem is not My Highest Joy!

- **Psalm 137:4-6:** How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land? ⁵If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! ⁶Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!

The expression, "let my right hand forget its skill and my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth," refers to his skill in playing music and his ability to sing in the choir of the LORD which also shines a light upon the fact that this Psalm is most likely written by a Levite who served the LORD in the House of God with musical instruments and songs of praise and worship. The words, "if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy," beautifully express what God's Holy city Jerusalem means to the heart of the Jews and the great honour and love they had for it. Likewise, the heartfelt cry of all the faithful in Christ is, "if I do not set the Lord Jesus Christ above my highest joy let me be as one most miserable." The key to finding true joy in the Lord and abundant spiritual life in the inner most being is to set the Lord upon the throne of our heart and make him the King of our mind, our life and for him to be our best thought. When we love Christ as much as this Psalmist loved Jerusalem our faith and joy will not be lacking the blessing of God and the presence of Christ's Spirit and love.

PSALM 137:7

The Edomites said, "Lay Jerusalem Down to its Foundations!"

- **Psalm 137:7:** Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, "Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!"

Esau was the father of Edom (the people are called Edomites). Esau despised God's name and did not fear or show him honour (Mal. 1:6).

Edom and the Babylonian captivity: when Jerusalem was destroyed and Judah was depopulated by the Babylonians in 586 B.C., the Edomites rejoiced over the affliction of the Judeans and began to take over the southern part of Palestine. Eventually they penetrated as far north as Hebron. This action intensified the already smoldering hatred between the Jews and the Edomites (Psalm 137:7) (Ezek. 25:12-14) (Amos 1:11) (Obadiah 10-14). The LORD through the prophet Amos said He would punish Edom for the following four transgressions (Amos 1:11-12).

1. Edom pursued his brother Jacob with the sword.
2. Edom showed his brother Jacob no pity.
3. Edom was perpetually angry toward his brother Jacob.
4. Edom kept his wrath toward his brother Jacob forever.

God re-named Jacob Israel he is the father of the twelve tribes of Israel which means Edom and his descendants the Edomites were not only aggressively against them but also permanently hostile toward them this is why the LORD said he would punish Edom.

PSALM 137:8

O Babylon, doomed to be Destroyed.

- **Psalm 137:8:** O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us!

The words, "blessed shall he be who repays you for what you have done to us," refers to Cyrus the King of Persia who God used as His shepherd to conquer the Empire of Babylon and set Israel free from their seventy years in captivity.

- The LORD says of Cyrus, "He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfil all my purpose," saying of Jerusalem, "She shall be built," and of the temple, "Your foundation shall be laid." ---
-NOW GO TO CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE ---- ¹Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed. (Isaiah 44:28) to (Isaiah 45:1).

The LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing that the LORD had charged him to let His people go and build the LORD a House in Jerusalem. (2 Chron. 36:22-23) (Ezra 1:1-2) (Ezra 5:13-17) (Ezra 6:3) (Ezra 6:14).

PSALM 137:9

Blessed shall He be who Dashes Your Little Ones against the Rock.

- **Psalm 137:9:** Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!

This may seem like a harsh prayer to pray, but remember the Psalms are not written to be nice and appeal to our Christian calling they are the honest expression of the writers' heart before God. Added to this these people were under the law that stated, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for

a tooth," this was their mindset so it is easy to understand why this man would pray such a harsh prayer. It should also be noticed that he is not saying he will go out and administer such vengeance, but praying that should such things come upon his enemies God would not do anything to stop them. Before judging the writer of this Psalm to harshly ponder for a moment how you would feel in your heart if a pagan group of people attacked your family, destroyed your home and abused your daughters, or you were standing with the crowd watching the religious leaders of Jesus generation smiling as they watched with glee the Roman soldiers mocking, whipping and brutally forcing a crown of thorns on Jesus head then cruelly nail his broken, suffering and bleeding body to the cross perhaps we might pray the same prayer with tears in our eyes. Jesus famous Sermon on the Mount is a very high calling and only one man has attained to its perfection and he gave his life so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16).

As the founder of Bible House of Grace, I would like to thank the many Christian scholars, commentators and theologians who have gone before me, and the many today, who have freely made available their works to enhance the knowledge of the Bible to all people worldwide. It is only with the help of these faithful writers that much of Bible House of Grace exists as it does today.

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