

# The Exile Song (Psalm 137)

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 31 January 2021

Preacher: William HC

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     You've created this psalm for us today. Father, thank you the Bible is not boring. We are, but you're not. And thank you that we see through the ups and downs of God's people that praying to you is not just being nice and tidy before you, but being open before you.

And so, Father, as we hear some of these, the most open and raw and wild words, that you would help us to remember we are exiles. You'd help us to weep for the evil that's among us.

You'd help us to remember our true home with you. And, Father, would you pour out your anger on everything that is evil in our midst. Father, this is a hard psalm, so be with us. In Jesus' name.

Amen. Verse 9 might still be ringing in your heads. I don't blame you. You're probably wondering, like, maybe you're a visitor here, and this is your first Bible reading, and you're thinking, how could God's people say this?

I thought God is love, right? Or I thought Jesus, if I know anything about Him, Jesus said, love your enemies. What's going on here? What do we do with this psalm? What do we do with this psalm? Do we put one of those explicit content warnings and then just skip past it?

[ 1 : 1 2 ]     Plenty of Christians have. More than one prayer book, when I looked it up, actually cuts out the last few verses. It's just too hard, right? And so you wouldn't use it for church.

There was actually, in the 70s, a disco group called Boney M. They actually made the first four verses popular. Yeah, they bobbed their heads, and then they'd sing, by the rivers of Babylon, that sort of thing.

Yeah. That guy looks like Isaac a little bit, just a bit more here. They made the first four verses popular. So ironically, you're actually more likely to hear this psalm, you know, at a disco revival than in a church.

And yet this psalm is part of the 150, right, that are included in God's hymn book. And as harsh as these words sound, it is God's word for us. Not only that, it's actually, I've got a chart there.

It's placed in the last section of the psalm book, okay? And in the last section, book five, you start to get a lot of psalms that people sang together as God's people. Even if you looked at the titles in your book, sorry, if you have your Bibles open, look at the titles before and after the psalm, right?

[ 2 : 1 9 ]     Psalm 133, how good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity. These are together songs. Praise the Lord and praise the Lord, right? 134, 135. You see, this psalm is kind of embedded within songs to sing together as God's people.

But why would we ever sing this kind of song? Why would we as PCBC English ever want to sing about stuff like this? I think to get anything out of Psalm 137, or any psalm that, or any song, or any part of the Bible that we get confused about, I think we need to remember that, first, the Bible is God's word for us.

When Paul said in 2 Timothy 3.16, that all scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, instruction, he includes Psalm 137 too.

And yet, these are timeless words, right, for us today. They've come to us through authors who lived in a different time, a different culture, and wrote in different genres than we are used to.

And so part of our job as God's people, as we hear from this book, is to bridge the world between the world of the Bible and into the world today, into our world today, you see.

[ 3 : 34 ] We're doing a bit of cross-cultural communication, as it were. You guys do this all the time, right? You speak, you know, one language in your home and then another language at school, and you're trying to navigate the difference sometimes. Going through God's word can be like that.

And look, if there's space in our own lives for Korean hip-hop, or German opera, or Swedish EDM, I mean, look, we've got time and space for Psalm 137, okay?

So, yeah. And actually, I think we need a song like this. We need an exile song, okay? We're not always happy. We're not always raging.

We're not always depressed. Sometimes we feel sad that we don't belong here. I wonder if you've ever felt that. Maybe you are having a personal struggle right now.

Maybe you have an illness or disability or feelings inside that no one else around you understands. You feel like you don't belong here. Maybe you are shocked by what is happening around the world.

[ 4 : 35 ] Things that people do to other people. Atrocities. Genocide. The exile song is for you. Maybe you've been struggling because people in your family mock you, dismiss you, make fun of you, because you are here at church today.

Then the exile song is for you. Because the exile song asks us, how do we worship God when we are sad and we feel we don't belong? Or when we're mad at all the evil in the world around us?

That's why we need Psalm 137. So what we'll do today is a little bit simpler. We're just going to walk through the psalm, verse by verse. It's not very long. I want us to feel the pain and sorrow of these first songwriters.

Make it ours. And then I'll just share three brief things we can do to better respond as God's people in exile. Is that okay?

Can you do that? All right, let me read verse one again. By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

[ 5 : 44 ] Here we are thrown back into a time of God's people called the exile. This happened in 586 BC. I've just put up a chart. This is from a book called God's Big Picture.

Really helpful. And we're kind of in the purple bit there. I've just drawn a circle around that. That's a time of God's history that we're in. So earlier, we've had psalms from earlier where King David is singing about, remember how good he is.

We've had other kinds of songs from different people, even from Moses and some of the psalms. Here, we are in exile. There is no more joyful song from King David. That's all gone.

Because God's people in Judah were conquered by the Babylonian empire because of their sins. And what's happened is that they've been carted off as captives from their homeland, Jerusalem, to Babylon, about 1,500 miles, kilometers away.

They have been exiled as God's people. And now, it wasn't all doom and gloom. A few people like Daniel, you might have read his story, and his companions, they were fed, they were educated, looked after, but in a foreign culture.

[ 6 : 55 ] They were never truly safe either. And Babylon was never truly their home. Here in Psalm 137, we have another group, like Daniel, like others.

This is God's people who sit there in Babylon, remembering their home. Their home. It's called Zion here. Another word for Jerusalem.

The city where God himself once dwelt with his people has now been reduced to rubble. The temple was burned to the ground when the Babylonians came in and sacked the city.

Our friends and family and neighbors, they were either slaughtered or they were starved to death. So they wept. How they wept as they remembered the devastation and loss.

How they mourned the loss of who they were, their heritage, their culture. They mourned God's presence leaving them. Here we have a picture of tears flowing down their cheeks as the waters flow past them.

[ 7 : 57 ] Verse 2. There, on the poplars or willows, trees, we hung our harps. Perhaps these were the temple musicians. Imagine the worship team being carted off to Babylon.

But they won't play. All right? Maybe the Babylonians said, hey, come. We'll keep you guys alive. We want you to play some funky music for us, you know, when we feel like a little bit of exotic culture.

But this band, they hang up their harps. They won't play. Why? Verse 3. For there our captors asked us for songs. Our tormentors demanded songs of joy and they said, sing us one of the songs of Zion.

Hey, Israelites, give us a catchy tune. I'm a bit bored right now. Can you sing that one that is really, really catchy? The one that goes like, bless the Lord, oh my soul. Yeah, come on, come on.

Just sing it for us. Sing it for us. They're not really showing off their cultured musical taste, the Babylonians here. They want to shame God's people, you see. They're prison, in prison, they're slaves to them.

[ 8 : 59 ] Imagine if you and I were, for example, carried off to, I don't know, carried off to an enemy nation, for example. Let's, wildest nightmares, right? Australia comes and invades and we all get taken and, you know, imprisoned in, I don't know, Australia somewhere.

And then one of them says, hey, you're a Kiwi. Can you do the haka for us? Do the haka. What about God defend New Zealand? How's that going now for you? Could you sing that for us?

How do you feel? How do you feel? That's how they feel. That's how they feel. How can we sing, though, verse four, the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?

Perhaps their eyes are still red with tears. And yet the psalmist replies. He's doing this kind of talking to himself thing. We talked about this in some of the other psalms, right? He's talking to himself.

How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land? All right? First, ask myself a question. It's a rhetorical question because the answer is obvious, right? When we are far from home and we have been treated this way, we cannot sing the songs of the Lord.

[ 10 : 08 ] How can we sing when we are this far from home? We cannot. How can we just make music while the Babylonians make fun of us? We cannot. We're going to stay loyal to Yahweh.

How? We won't sing. We won't sing. In fact, verse five says, he makes a promise to himself. If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand, right, my guitar strumming hand or piano playing hand, forget its skill.

I'd rather forget how to play music before I forget Jerusalem, my true home. Call me loyal. Verse six, may my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I don't remember you, if I don't consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

In other words, close my mouth, make me mute if I get comfortable here in exile and forget you. Shut me up if your kingdom is not my highest joy right now.

I'd rather lose my voice than lose sight of God's kingdom. Call me loyal. After these kind of lines of self-talk, the psalmist's memory is renewed, right?

- [ 11 : 18 ] He's still sad, but there's a change of tone. I wonder if you noticed as Venus read it. He knows where he belongs, not in Babylon. And now that he's remembered, he talks to God and says, God, could you remember too?

I've remembered. Could you remember? Remember this, verse seven, remember, oh Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. Tear it down, they cried.

Tear it down to its foundations. Who are the Edomites? Well, Obadiah was one of the minor prophets in the Bible. It's a tiny one-page book if you want to read it in your own time, next to Jonah, actually.

And in Obadiah, he tells, as Judah was being invaded by the Babylonians, this is what the Edomites did. They rejoiced over their downfall. And so Obadiah, the prophet, has to warn them, don't do that.

Stop doing that. Can you picture this as Jacob's children, right, were being slaughtered? Esau's children, like Obadiah, I'm sorry, the Edomites, they were looting their city, stealing their stuff.

- [ 12 : 21 ] They were refusing to accept any of their refugees. They were handing over survivors, actually, to the Babylonians to be killed. Here when it says, tear it down, tear it down, right, in verse 7.

Actually, the verse literally reads, lay it bare, lay it bare. It's the language of exploitation, of abuse. And the psalmist says, remember, Lord, what they did.

Remember, God. This is what they did to us. So remember, show your justice for what they've done. And then finally, we get to kind of the climax of the psalm, as we were, verse 8 and 9.

O daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you've done to us. He who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

One commentator says, at this point, maybe it's a good thing that the Babylonians probably didn't understand what they were singing, right? They didn't know they're Hebrew. So, some people, they try and fudge this or they try and work around it.

- [ 13 : 26 ] It's really hard, isn't it? You know, I read this to my kids and I don't think it was pleasant reading for all of us. Some people, they read this and they go, oh, when it says happy, it's probably, you know, it probably just means like fitting or it's okay or yeah, alright.

You know, they try and tone it down. But actually, that word, when it says happy, we've seen that before. Do you remember, blessed is the one, happy is the one. who walks not in the counsel of the wicked.

Same word. That kind of ramps up the stakes, doesn't it? How can this be a happy cry after all the cruelty, the oppression and injustice God's people experience?

How can we say this is a happy cry? I can't answer all the questions that you might have, but I can at least remind us of two things. One, this is a very unique cry.

There's nothing quite like it. And it's a unique cry of a people who have been ravaged by war. If you've ever read memoirs from someone who survived the Holocaust when Nazi Germany destroyed the whole population, or if you've read about the rape of Nanking, right, Nanjing, some of those stories, this is the similar cry of people who have been ravaged by war.

- [ 14 : 42 ] It's hard for us to understand firsthand. We've never lived through a war. We live in undeserved peace. This is a group of people who have had to bury their children, who have had to watch foreign armies rape and pillage their homes.

So, that's the context. That's why it's so fierce. And the other thing we need to remember is that this cry in verse 9, we have to read it with verse 8.

Atheist blogs love to pull verse 9 and then just post it and make beautiful memes out of them. Look, they've already taken it out of context. You need to read it with verse 8. It is saying it would be fitting for Babylon, okay, for all the hurt they did to God's people to receive the same back.

No more and no less than what God allowed the Babylonians to do to the Israelites, right? God is just and fair even in judgment.

And actually, in fact, many of the prophets predicted this judgment for the Babylonians. They had it coming to them for their own sins as well. Even in Isaiah 13, 16, Evan talks about this very same thing that their infants would be dashed in pieces before their eyes.

[16:02] So the sense we have here is not pretty but the sense we have here is this. Justice will come and it will be bathed in the blood of their sons. Okay?

Justice will come one day and it will be bathed in the blood of their sons. The picture here as the psalm ends is of God's people in chains.

They have been crying, weeping, they have been angry when they remember Jerusalem's destruction, how it happened, who did it to them. And they finally look their captors in the eye and they say, you want a song?

You want a song? I'll give you a song. I will give you a song. I pray God gives you what you gave to us and our families. I pray your family is wiped out.

That's how the psalm ends. It's hard, isn't it? Maybe it's a bit too wild for you. I get it. This is about as comfortable as watching one of those widows.

[17:01] I wonder if you watched the sentencing when the Christchurch gunman was sentenced. listening to widow after widow, child, people who had lost their family because of this terrorist who shot down people in the mosque.

Just reading there and hearing their stories, how it impacted them. That kind of rawness here. Right? Honest words, unfiltered, still in God's Bible.

Let's break it up a bit. Let me just shift tack. Let me remind you of one of the things I've been doing recently is trying to watch Oscar winning movies. I feel like if I want to be more cultured, I should just go to the top.

One that Cheryl and I actually watched a while back is a movie called Life is Beautiful. I wonder who's watched this one before? Life is Beautiful. Yeah, one person. Fantastic. It did come out in 1997.

Three. Fantastic. It did come out in 1997, so before some of you were born. That's okay. It actually won the Academy Award for Best Foreigner Film. A brief synopsis. In it, there's an Italian Jewish man.

[18:07] His name's Guido, I think. He's just a joker. He's a comedian, right? Falls in love, has a family, and yet over time because he's Jewish and he's living in Italy, the wrong city at the time, he eventually gets taken to a concentration camp where the Nazis take him and his five-year-old son.

And what happens is this. He's a bit of a comedian and he doesn't let his guard down. Instead of telling his son, we're going to a concentration camp and you might die. He turns it into a game. He says to his five-year-old son, hey, guess what?

We got selected to go into play a game and the first prize, if you win, you get a tank. And so this kid is just like, oh, when do I get this tank? How many points do we have, Daddy?

And he's doing this all in between them trying to survive in a concentration camp, right? Trying to survive not being killed. They're trying to hide and then eventually, I won't spoil the ending, but eventually, you know, the son actually never learns the truth.

Never learns the truth. Now, look, it was a great movie. I laughed a lot. There were so many beautiful moments and yet underlying the story, there was this worldview and it's this. It's better to pretend life is beautiful than to tell the truth, right?

[ 19 : 26 ] Better to pretend life is beautiful than to tell the truth. But I wonder how often we think like that, even as God's people. I wonder how often we pretend life is beautiful but we avoid hard truths.

We tell ourselves, she'll be right, mate. No worries. Okay? Or maybe we just turn off the news when it gets too depressing. We make sure that in church we just sing the happy songs, the upbeat songs.

Or we avoid parts of town that will make us feel a little bit scared or skittish, right? So just hang out in East Auckland all the time. I don't know. We pretend life is beautiful but we avoid the truth. So let's not do that.

Let's not avoid the truth. Let me share three, I think, things to consider. Possible right responses from Psalm 137 for Christians. Okay? Three things.

I think we can weep, we can remember, and we can ask. We can weep, remember, ask. So first thing I think we can learn from this Psalm is this. It's okay to weep over where we are living in, in the midst of Babylon.

[ 20 : 33 ] Now, you're probably looking at me and going, no, I live in Auckland and it looks great and I had a brilliant weekend and life is beautiful here. This is paradise. No. We need eyes of faith to see, actually, life is not always beautiful.

We are in the midst of Babylon. Okay? These musicians knew this. They were happy to shed tears over their tragic state. They probably lived in one of the most advanced cities in the world, civilizations in the world, but they knew the truth.

This is not paradise. We must weep over where we are. I mean, think about it. When 13,000 Kiwis made in God's image are murdered every year through abortion here in New Zealand, we should weep.

This is Babylon. When New Zealand has one of the world's most worst youth suicide rates, this is not paradise. This is Babylon. When it's easier to fill a sports stadium than to fill a church with people wanting to hear God's word, we are in Babylon.

When our brothers and sisters, let's think around the world, when they are arrested, tortured, killed, just for reading this book here, we are in Babylon.

[ 21 : 53 ] This is not home. When 29% of this whole world has never heard of Jesus and they will have no chance of hearing about Jesus because they do not live near a Christian or a Bible or a church, we should weep.

we are in Babylon. So we can weep to God. The psalm gives us permission. We are not home.

This is a world broken by sin. It is weighed down by the effects of the fall. Let's be honest with ourselves. That's the first thing I think the psalm invites us to do.

Be honest. We are not home. We are in the midst of Babylon and we are in exile. That's our first point. We should weep where we are.

The second point is this, we should also remember our true home. Remember our true home. All right. Let me ask you a question. Okay. Why would the psalmist need to remind himself not to forget about Jerusalem?

[ 23 : 00 ] Right. After all, he's Jewish, you know, obviously, or he or she, the people singing together. They probably hung out together and knew that they were. Why would they need to remind themselves? It's because it's easy to forget.

Right. Not everyone during the exile turns out wanted to go home. Okay. In fact, 70 years later, Babylon themselves are conquered. Okay. They're conquered by the Persian Empire.

And Cyrus, the Persian king, actually says, he's got a different policy. He says, look, you guys can go home now. Go worship your gods. And Ezra, chapter 1, 64, records, only 42,000 did so.

What about everyone else? What about everyone else? They forgot. They forgot their true home. God's kingdom was no longer their highest joy.

What? What? Jesus? Oh, you want me to take up my cross and follow you? But it's so comfy here. I don't want to go anywhere.

[ 24 : 03 ] Can you see? Can you see? Do we even believe we're in exile? Or do you and I fit so snugly into this world that no one would know your true allegiance?

Are you and I God's people in theory but we're just Babylonians in practice? What do you live for, friends? What do you live for? Graduation glory?

Homeowner heaven? Perfect profile on Facebook? Examine your hearts. If there is something other than God that is your highest joy, using these words, then that's something you need to turn from and let go because you need to remember your true home.

And when you and I, friends, when our senses and affections, they are dulled because of the idols of this world, right? Heaven, our true home, is going to grow dimmer and dimmer and dimmer until we forget.

And the only way to fight that is to remember like these people did, that God's kingdom should be our highest joy. Hebrews 13 reminds us of this.

[ 25 : 12 ] 13 verse 14. Here we do not have an enduring city. We are looking for the city that is to come. And I think that's why gathering is God's people.

As hard as it is, as annoying as it is to get out of bed and come to church at 4.30, right? It's so important. So important. It is much easier to live in exile and remind yourselves of your true home when you do it together.

much easier to forget when you stay home. Right? But that, of course, assumes that when we come together we want to be a bunch of exiles together.

Not just a bunch of, I don't know, cultural cliques, friends, social groups. We need to be a bunch of exiles longing for our true home. Longing for our true home.

Friends, don't live for this world. It won't last. Live for God's kingdom. Look to the new Jerusalem where our prize is. That is where our true home should be.

[ 26 : 14 ] And finally, point three. I want to be extra careful here. Finally, I think Psalm 137 shows us what a righteous response to God's enemies might look like.

We want to be careful. We're not God. We don't go and get sticks and go storm buildings or hit people. That's not what we do.

But Psalm 137 says it's okay, I think, to ask God to pour out His anger on everything that is evil. The psalmist here longs for God's justice to reign.

One author puts it this way. We need to find a way to curse, as it were, to swear without actually swearing. And that's what a psalm like Psalm 137 helps Christians to do.

Okay? Helps Christians to do. We still need to cry out like these guys because so much evil in this world cannot ever be fixed in court or in prison or by buying things or by changing governments.

[ 27 : 19 ] So when we see all this injustice that we cannot fix humanly, we can take a cue from Psalm 137 and pray our anger to God. Ask Him to crush terrorists, evil regimes.

Ask Him to destroy presidents and chairmen that kill God's people. Ask God to take down every novel and film that glorifies abuse.

Ask God to just shut the mouths of every single preacher today that is preaching a false gospel. Ask Him to crush Babylon. You can do that.

This is an invitation. Everything that is opposed to God, God, would you crush it completely? Again, we don't go further than what God says. We don't go further than asking God to act, not us.

We are not the crusaders. We are not the avengers. We must leave it with God. Vengeance is mine, right? He says in Romans 12, I will repay. It is His kingdom and in His timing He will right every wrong.

[ 28 : 26 ] He will wipe away every tear. That is what Christians believe. And so with the psalmist, we can trust that true deliverance comes from the Lord. We can even pray with Jesus, right? Let your kingdom come.

Let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven with Jesus. Yeah. With Jesus. Because even a psalm like this, as bleak and dark, we could see.

We can see now, right? This psalm even points to the Son, Jesus Christ. Because we know that Psalm 137 is not where God's story ends. Here we learn that God's enemies will warn that justice will come and it will be bathed in the blood of their sons.

And we know this side of the cross that justice did come for every sin. But how did it come? It was bathed in the blood of God's Son. You see?

God's justice for your sin, my sin, Hitler's sin, everyone's sin, it has been poured out. The justice for that on Jesus. On Jesus.

[ 29 : 35 ] Whether it was genocide, whether it was my grumpy heart, Jesus paid for it. That's the gospel. That's the good news. And just like Psalm 137, this deliverance that Jesus gave us, it was messy, it was violent, it would be explicit content, and yet it brought blessing, undeserved blessing to you and to me, to this world.

So messy, right? Jesus enters this world through the muck of blood. It's violent, he lives a perfect life and he's captured, tried, accused falsely of charges and he's nailed on a cross to die, to pay for sins that he did not commit, to take the Father's wrath for sin, to earn our life of undeserved peace.

And it brings blessing as he died on the cross for us while we were sinners, he reconciled us by his blood. God's justice was bathed in the blood of his Son.

Some of you here are exploring Christianity. Thank you for coming. Thank you for coming. I'm so glad you're here. Some of you here are really sad right now.

Maybe it took a lot of courage to walk through those doors today. You feel you don't belong. Whatever you're feeling, whatever you and I feel, what we need most of all is to know that justice has been paid and we have been bathed in the blood of the Son.

[ 30 : 58 ] Okay? What you need most of all is that. God's justice to be satisfied, your sins to be paid. Not by you. You could never do it. But by Jesus Christ.

That's the gospel invitation. And if you've never, if you've never turned from your sins before and trusted in Christ alone for your salvation, if you've never said, I'm willing to go into exile with Jesus, then make today the day you do that.

Make today the day you do that. And you know what? The beauty of the gospel, the good news is this. When you go into exile with Jesus, it's not sad, but it's safe.

When you go into exile with Jesus, you and I truly belong. Yes, you do. You belong to a better kingdom, ruled by a better king, one that will not fade or pass away.



And this king is returning soon. Every day, it's a day closer. When Jesus comes back, it will be his turn, okay, to trample the winepress of wrath, Revelation says, on all that is evil.

[ 32 : 02 ] He will repay Babylon with all that it has done. Whether Babylon is our society today, whether it is evil and injustice in the world, everything will be repaid by Jesus, the king.

So friends, when you and I are sad, we don't feel like we belong here, when we are mad at all that this world is doing to each other and to us, let's be sad about it.

Let's be sad about it. Weep for where we are and let's remember that we have a true home, a better home, God's kingdom. And let's remember that because of Jesus, one day, we will see our true home, the new Jerusalem where every tear is wiped away and every wrong will be made right again.

Friends, would you pray with me? Let's pray. Father in heaven, holy and hallowed is your name.

Father, your kingdom come and your will be done on this earth. Please, it's so messed up. Make your will be done here as it is in heaven. And give us this day our daily bread.

[ 33 : 22 ] Help us to be content with what we have, not to be comfortable here, not too much, not too little. Give it to us today. Forgive us our sins. We have forgotten you.

We have raged against the wrong things. We have been too complacent at the loss around us. Forgive us our sins and forgive us even as we forgive those who sin against us.

And please, Father, lead us not into temptation. Please don't tempt us, Lord, with the riches of this world and make us comfortable here. Deliver us from evil.

For yours is the kingdom, Father, and the power and the glory forever and ever and ever. And we long for that day. We pray that we'll see it soon.

In Jesus' name. Amen.