

I

The moment I stepped off the elevator, I could tell something was wrong. I was 23 years old, an up-and-coming account executive with an international marketing agency. Our Dallas offices were on the 46th and 47th floors of the Chase Bank Tower in downtown, Dallas, Texas.

But that Tuesday morning, not a soul was at their desk. Instead, everyone in our office was huddled around the television in the conference room, where the camera was focused on an office building in New York belching black smoke into the clear blue sky.

Everyone was mostly quiet, until the second plane hit. Then, things began to happen quickly. From our conference room on the 46th floor, we had a clear view of the runways at Dallas' Love Field Airport. One of my colleagues gestured in the direction of the airport and said to us all, "Maybe we shouldn't be here right now."

I never made it to my desk that morning. All of us gathered our things and headed for the elevators. A few minutes later, I was back in my car, inching my way through traffic as downtown Dallas emptied out at 10:00 in the morning on a Tuesday.

Later that night, as I watching the news reports, the camera showed people in on the other side of the world who appeared to be celebrating and laughing and dancing in the streets, like their favorite sports team had just scored a victory. And the fear I'd been feeling all day turned into boiling hot rage. How could anyone celebrate the cold-blooded murder of thousands of innocent people?

I still vividly remember the front page of the next day's *Dallas Morning News*. In big, black letters, it simply said, "War at Home." I recall a quote in from a Georgia Senator by the name of Zell Miller. Although I don't remember it precisely, I think he said something to the effect of, "I say bomb the hell out of them, whoever they are. They certainly didn't care about our people." And I remember thinking to myself, "Amen, brother. Let's them have it, whoever they are."

II

There's something deep inside all of us, I think, that is hard-wired to respond with that kind of potency when we've experienced that kind of trauma, and when those who have inflicted the trauma mock our pain.

It's more than a cry for justice. Justice, in general terms, connotes some kind of balance, some kind of remedy that seeks to make the injured party whole again, some sense of restoration and peace.

But on that when we've experienced that level of trauma, when our adversaries mock us and humiliate us, somewhere deep inside us comes a desire to seek revenge not

just on those responsible for our pain, but to wipe their descendants from the face of the earth, too.

And that's a pretty dark, intense, powerful feeling. It's not a feeling that we usually talk about outside of very small circles, because it's generally a social taboo to talk about vengeance that targets the guilty and the innocent alike. But that dark, intense, powerful feeling is brought right out into the light in today's reading from Psalm 137.

III

This summer, we've been preaching our way through the Book of Psalms, and as we've said all along, Psalms is not a book in the classical sense of that word, but it's an anthology, a collection of poems and prayers and hymns that was gathered over a long period of time in biblical history.

It's been said that every emotion that we are capable of feeling as human beings can be found expressed somewhere within the 150 psalms, and today's reading is a testament to that truth, because today's reading is a communal cry for vengeance against an enemy.

Because the psalms were composed and collected over a long period of time, it's often difficult for scholars to establish a date or historical context for many of them. But in order to fully grasp Psalm 137, we need to briefly recall one of the key stories of the Hebrew Scriptures.

A little less than 600 years before the birth of Christ, our ancestors in Jerusalem were under threat. They were a tiny nation surrounded by world superpowers, but they were convinced that God was on their side and would protect them from calamity. Jerusalem wasn't just the political and military capital of the land – it was the religious capital, too, for Jerusalem was home to the Temple, which our ancestors believed was the very dwelling place of God on earth. At the time of its construction, the Temple was the largest and most grand structure in the known world. For our ancestors, it wasn't just a building – it was the centerpiece of their identity, their fortress against a hard, cruel, and chaotic world.

But a little less than 600 years before the birth of Jesus, the Babylonian Empire invaded the Land of Promise and breached the walls of Jerusalem. They laid waste to the city, killed hundreds if not thousands of innocent people, and ripped the Temple down to its foundations. Then the Babylonians rounded up many of the survivors and deported them out of the Land of Promise and forced them to live as slaves in exile. Alongside the story of the Exodus, the story of the fall of Jerusalem and exile is *the* pivotal historical event of the Hebrew Scriptures.

So with that background in mind, I invite you now to listen for a Word from God from Psalm 137.

By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.

On the willows there we hung up our harps.

For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!”

O daughter Babylon, you devastator!

Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!

Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!

Every emotion that we’re capable of feeling as human beings is expressed somewhere within the pages of the psalms. And here in Psalm 137 is a cry not for justice, not for balance, not for reparations, but for revenge. After recalling the pain of destruction and humiliation, the psalmist closes by delighting in the idea of the destruction not just of the Babylonian soldiers, but in the thought of those soldiers’ children being dashed against the rocks.

And if that notion troubles you my friend, you’re in good company. It is troubling that a text would cast the thought of the murder of children in anything other than a negative light. In fact, oftentimes, when Psalm 137 is sung or read, the final two verses are omitted. But they’re right there in the text. So what are we going to do with them?

Walter Brueggemann, one of the preeminent biblical scholars in the world, calls psalms like this one “therapeutic,” in that they are speech in a safe place.¹ In a therapist’s office, you can express feelings and say things out loud that you would dare not say to any other human being in any other context. In a therapists’ office, you can

¹ This is my personal recollection of a lecture I was privileged to hear Dr. Brueggemann give on Psalms when I was a student at Columbia Theological Seminary in 2004.

give voice and expression to your very deepest, darkest feelings, to “let it all out,” so to speak, without fear of reprisal or repercussion.

And that, my friend, is what is happening in Psalm 137. The psalmist is “letting it all out” before the throne of God, testifying to God about the pain, about the humiliation, about the grief, and about the psalmist’s desire for not justice, but revenge.

IV

And so if the psalmist can express those kinds of feelings to God, so can you, my friend. After all, there is so much anger in our world today.

And maybe you feel like one person, or one particular group of people, is to blame for much of your own anger and grief. Maybe that person or people don’t seem to care that they’re causing you pain and grief. Maybe they even seem to be doing it on purpose and enjoying it.

And so maybe you feel welling up within you not just a cry for justice, but revenge. Maybe the thought of their utter destruction and everything they care about, including their descendants, is a salve to your wounds.

And if that’s the case, Psalm 137 gives you permission to pray exactly that. Because there is no feeling, no emotion, is taboo or too hot to handle before the throne of God. The Psalms are speech in a safe place. No matter how powerful or dark they may be, you need not hide your feelings from the God who made you, the God who sustains you, the God who redeems you.

You are allowed to sit and rest by the rivers of Babylon.

But Jesus won’t let you live there.

If anyone knows what it is to be wrongly attacked, to be beaten, to be mocked, to be tormented, it’s Jesus of Nazareth. But along comes Jesus, and he sits down next to you there by the waters, he sits with you in your pain and anger and rage. And he puts his pierced hand on your shoulder, and he looks you in the eye, and he says,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.” And then he beckons us to come and follow him.

See, here’s the thing, my friend. You can go and sit by the waters of Babylon when you feel the need to, but Jesus loves you too much to let you stay there forever. Jesus was not born, betrayed, crucified, dead, and resurrected for us so that we might live permanently there by the waters of Babylon. That is not our home.

Paraphrasing Andy Stanley of Northpoint Community Church in a sermon a few weeks ago, by the waters of Babylon, in that place of hot, burning rage, you can generate a whole bunch of followers on social media. You can raise a bunch of money. You can sell a whole bunch of books.²

But you can't solve problems there. You can't build up the kingdom of God there. And that's why Jesus won't let his disciples take up permanent residence there.

So how do we get beyond the waters? Or at least, how do we begin to take one step?

I want to invite you to try a thought experiment with me right now. I want you to visualize the person or people in your life who are driving you the most crazy, the person or people with whom you are the most angry or disappointed at this very moment.

Maybe you're thinking of a public figure. Maybe you're thinking of a group of people who seem to spend every waking hour of their lives advocating a position on a particular issue that you would spend every waking moment of your life advocating against. Maybe you're thinking of someone closer to home – someone or several someones who have deeply and grievously wronged you, then mocked you in your pain and despair.

I don't know about you, but at this very moment, as I visualize in my own mind those faces and what they represent for me, I can already feel my pulse picking up. I get this tingling sensation in my right arm, and without even thinking about it, my right hand reflexively balls up into a fist. When I think about those faces, when I think about what they represent and the anger and pain they have caused me, I have a physical reaction. I begin to understand more of the hot sentiment behind Psalm 137. I begin to get comfortable in my seat there by the waters of Babylon.

But again, along comes this rabbi. And he looks you and me in the eye, and he loves us, and he says, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Jesus invites us to pray that this person or those people who make you so angry, who have cause you pain and grief and despair, to pray that they would find everything you want for yourself in your own life – peace, and prosperity, and health and safety for themselves and their children.

That's a different kind of prayer, my friend. That's a different kind of discipleship. And I'll be honest with you, I'm still learning how to do it. I struggle more than I succeed.

² Andy Stanley, "Not In It to Win It," NorthPoint Community Church, August 16, 2020, <https://northpoint.org/messages/not-in-it-to-win-it>, accessed August 23, 2020.

But when I can actually force myself to do it, to really and truly pray for those who make me so angry, something begins to happen to me. My pulse begins to slow down a bit. My arm relaxes. My breathing begins to even out. Without even always being aware that it's happening, I begin to take small steps away from the waters of Babylon.

I have no idea if that kind of prayer changes them. But it always changes me.

V

And here's what I think is at stake for all of us in this moment, my friends. I think the fallen powers and principalities of this world want us all to take up permanent residence there by the waters of Babylon. I think they want us to be permanently sad, to be permanently angry, to so full of vengeance that we can't see straight.

Because if we will go ahead and make the waters of Babylon our permanent address, the fallen powers and principalities of this world can have their run of the place. They can go about their work of opposing and destroying the kingdom of God. They don't care whether we're full of despair, or humiliated, or vengeful. As long as we're doing those things, we're not doing justice and loving kindness and building the kingdom of God, so it's all the same to them.

Because the fallen powers and principalities of this world know what to do with hatred. They know what to do with violence. They know what to do with anger and despair. But they can't handle the kind of love that Jesus modeled for us all on the cross.

They can't handle the kind of love that finds the strength, the audacity, the hope, to *pray* for the peace and well-being of the very ones who are the source of our pain and anger and humiliation.

Turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, those aren't the moves of suckers. They are acts of resistance.

They are the very means by which we begin to move beyond the waters of Babylon.

They are the very means by which we resist the fallen powers of this world.

Loving our enemies and praying for the ones that would oppose and persecute and mock us – that's our gospel work.

May we be about it this day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.