

Selections from the Psalms | Joy • Lament • Jesus

06 I Cannot Sing

July 16, 2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Remember the stories I shared two weeks ago about the Coptic Christian who have been suffering great loss for remaining faithful, well there was an interesting article¹ I read about their response to the onslaught of abuse and murder. Much of what they said in regards to this continuation of savage persecution was just like the Psalms we read. They are hurting and frustrated at the non-stop persecution. They have, rightly so, a righteous anger. Many are finding it difficult to forgive and some are wanting to retaliate with the same amount of brutality. One lady shouted at one of the funerals, “We can do as they do and kill every day.” I think we all can relate to that cry. It must be difficult to endure such hardship daily. The most interesting thing is she quickly followed up with, “But we are Christians, and Jesus has taught us love and faith. God will defend our rights.” Another said, “God will avenge us.” Though there has been no retaliation, there is a cry for God to avenge. There is a deep seeded belief that God will avenge and his vengeance is right but theirs would be wrong. It is hard and frustrations rage, as one bishop said, “Anyone would be angry with the cross we are bearing.”

I am struck by the similarities to Ps 137. We don't have to look very far to see the mistreatment of Christians. We don't have to do much work to feel what the Psalmist felt in this Psalm. We have a front row seat to such tragedies.

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2017/june/egypt-persecuted-christians-righteous-anger-copts-isis.html>

Lets be frank here. The bible is full of violence and this becomes a major stumbling block for many because how can the words of life—God's Word—speak of taken life so much. Matter of fact, the very thing we cling to for our greatest hope was a massacre; Jesus' death and burial.

If anything this is not a black eye for the bible, but rather gives it validity by making it a very real book full of real life events. It does not side step the violence that exist in the world, but with a very different way of dealing with it.

It reveals the ugliness of life (sin's fullest effects are on display) only to make plain the beauty of restoration and redemption found in Jesus, God the Son. We should consider it a help that the bible deals with such things, if it was void of it we might consider it unrealistic (BT: Fall).

The major difference is in its answer to the unavoidable tragedies, violence, destructive nature of sin; that God himself takes the violence, takes the punishment upon himself.

This Psalm begins with reflecting on the captivity they felt and still feel (1-4), then a strong vow to be loyal (5-6), and ends much differently than the Psalms we have looked at over the last few weeks; it ends with asking for vengeance upon their captives (7-9).

So what is the issue, what is their lament...

II. THE ISSUE...1-4

- A. *Their location...*they are in Babylon not Jerusalem, they are not home in Zion. Everything is focused with these verses on location...they are not where they are suppose to be! The repeated prepositions all draw our attention to

location. What is the big deal with Jerusalem? and What does it mean to them?

1. Jerusalem / Zion

- a) Jerusalem is...the place of God's election and presence, protection, and glory.²
- b) Quite often, too, it denotes the seat and city of God, especially in the Psalms...³
- c) It is the place where God dwelled; it was his city; the place they worship, because that is where the temple was; so how can they sing a song of rejoicing about Zion when they are not there!

Everything was wrapped up in Jerusalem—the promises of God and the place where God reigned. Being outside of Jerusalem/Zion meant they were outside God's protection, outside where God's promises were going to be fulfilled and outside the place they would be cared for...they cannot sing when they are not there.

Babylon had captured them, performed horrific acts (we will see in a moment), and then taken them from God's land which signified God's presences and promises. To be in Jerusalem, was to be with God, to be outside Jerusalem, was to be outside of God.

2. They cannot sing! Their captors are asking them to sing as a way to mock them. They are not asking for

² D. F. Payne, "Jerusalem," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 563.

³ Eduard Lohse and Georg Fohrer, "Σιών, Ἱερουσαλήμ, Ἱεροσόλυμα, Ἱεροσολυμίτης," ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 300.

them to sing because they like their songs, they are tapping into singing as a way to mock them..."Go ahead sing those joyous songs from Zion."

They are trying to crush any remaining self dignity they have...they have taken them away from their land—God's land, which is where their entire identity was wrapped up—and now in asking for joyous songs that reminded them of what they have in God, well it was a debilitating reminder! But as we have seen with the Psalms, they were meant to be sung, so...

III. VOW OF LOYALTY 5-6

- A. They cannot sing a song of joy about Zion, but they can sing a song of lament that leads to loyalty to their God.
- B. Strong imagery to communicate the depth of their loyalty. Their captivity has developed a new found depth to their love for God. They never want to forget him and if they do, take away their ability to sing/serve. The two things needed to sing, hand to play the music and tongue to sing; take them both away! My their singing only deepen their commitment to follow God.
- C. Notice the little word ***joy!*** We began this entire series talking about the *source* of our joy, then the *command* to pursue joy, and lastly how to *express* joy.

And now the people of God are saying if you God are not my highest joy take away my abilities. A strong commitment to find joy in God alone; to have no greater affections before Him. He alone should sustain and satisfy. When that shifts bad things happen...we are headed towards captivity.

There is never more clarity than when we are pressed on every side. When pressed, all sources of strength/joy are shown for what they truly are...the only thing that can withstand the weight of life, is the triune God.

IV. REVENGE 7-9

This is really one of the most problematic scriptures in the entire bible, verse 9 in particular!

A. There are several ways to consider this text...

1. *Prophetic*—both Isaiah and history tell us that this would and did happen. Isaiah pronounces judgement on the Babylonians because of their treatment of Israel. History tells us that the Babylonians themselves killed their women and children to preserve themselves.⁴
2. The people of God are very familiar with the *Talion Principle*,⁵ which is eye for an eye, hand for a hand. The Babylonians made it a regular habit to slaughter people by the masses including children and had done this to the Israelites (Jer 52:10-11, Ps 137:8). So they are crying for justice; what had been done to them be done to the Babylonians. This captivity by the Babylonians was horrendous.

WE cannot begin to imagine the atrocities felt and seen during this time. We have a hard time fully understanding the depth to which they hurt. Our most modern day example is the article I referenced earlier

⁴ Both C H Spurgeon, *Treasury of David: Volume 3, Psalms 111-150* (Peabody, MA: Hendricks Publishing) and William Plummer, *Psalms* (Geneva Series of Commentaries, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Trust, First Print 1867, Reprint 2016) state this historical reality.

⁵ Crossway Bibles. *The ESV Study Bible*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), p. 1114.

about the Coptic Christians suffering. If you were them, how might you pray.

3. The Psalms are full of *highly suggestive imagery*. The people of God are asking that this evil be completely done away with to never exist again. It was not uncommon even in ANE culture, which the Psalms was written in, to take an ideal and make it concrete through imagery.

The children represent the continuation of the unrighteous empire; so stop them, stop the empire from progressing. Perhaps it is not a literal killing of babies but a way to make the stopping of an evil empire concrete.⁶

- B. Several observations need to be stated here as well...
 1. They are asking God to bring about his justice. They are not taking matters into their own hands but long for God to enact perfect justice. When we pray for justice to be served the sins of the unjust will have to be dealt with. Which has been dealt with!
 2. No Christian is allowed to take personal vengeance and harbor hate (Lev 19:17-18 / Matt 5:44).

V. THEREFORE

- A. Still sing, even if the song is sad...words help us have thoughts, music helps us feel, singing helps us feel thoughts. Do I really mean sing? Yes, make it a regular habit to sing the truths of God.⁷

⁶ Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), p 9.

⁷ Helpful podcast...http://tgc-audio.s3.amazonaws.com/podcast/Singing_the_Blues_as_Believers.mp3

- B. Seek God to administer justice and mercy as he sees fit...
your greatest effort to deal with hurt from others is seek
God
- C. Remain loyal to God, have an unshakable resolve to
remember God in times of trouble.
- D. Rejoice in Christ's death as God's vengeance on sin.
- E. Luke 19:44,"*Would that you, even you, had known on this
day the things that make for peace!*"