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Let Your Tears Fall

Daniel Broadwell

“By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down and wept, When we remembered Zion.” (Psalm 137:1 NASB)

We would do well to imitate the captives of Judah weeping in Babylon.

Because of their unfaithfulness to God, these Hebrews were dragged away from Jerusalem by their enemies. Every morning, they woke up in a foreign land—away from home, away from the temple, and away from the presence of God which had dwelt there. For those old enough to remember living in Zion, that memory was a seed planted in their heart which produced tears of pain as they were taunted by their captors (Psalm 137:3). “How can we sing Jehovah’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4) It was too hard. The memory of Zion made the present reality of exile unbearable.

But the psalmist does not despair. In fact, the memory of Zion is the very thing that keeps him rooted during this period of displacement.

“If I forget you, O Jerusalem, May my right hand forget her skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, If I do not remember you, If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my highest joy.” (Psalm 137:5-6 ESV)

The memory of home is painful. It causes the psalmist to weep. But it is his connection to reality, and without it, he knows that he has nothing to live for.

I imagine that many of us feel this way about our earthly home. For me, it is not hard to conjure up a memory of my childhood home which brings sorrow to my heart and tears to my eyes. I miss Mom. I miss exploring the woods and building forts with my brothers. I miss playing baseball with my dad late into the Summer evening. It hurts me that I’ll never experience these things in the same way again. Sometimes the pain seems unbearable.

But if I forgot the memory of home, I would in a very real sense lose my identity. This memory—as painful as it might be—keeps me rooted in who I am and what is important.

Of course, as the people of God, Psalm 137 describes our current experience.

In his first letter, Peter refers to his readers as **“sojourners and exiles”** (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11) and instructs them in godly living **“throughout the time of [their] exile”** (1 Peter 1:17). At the end of the book, he describes his own situation by saying, “She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you greetings” (1 Peter 5:13 NASB). From the beginning (Genesis 11), Babylon has always been the city of man, the city of idolatry, and Peter—likely in Rome—speaks of himself and his readers as captives in this rebellious city. He is not at home, and longs for the day when he will be. As he says in his second letter, “We are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells” (2 Peter 3:13).

It breaks our heart that we are not at home—not in the presence of the Lord as we were meant to be. We suffer the pain of loss and the fear of death. We are tortured by anxiety and troubled by broken relationships. We are discouraged by the evil in this world and the hostility we experience trying to be faithful to God. And what hurts us the most is that all these things are the result of humanity’s rebellion against God—a rebellion that we have fully participated in by sinning against our Creator. We have separated ourselves from the Source of life and of goodness, and it hurts. As Augustine of Hippo wrote at the end of the fourth century, “You have made us for Yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in You” (Confessions I.i)

And so we should weep. But the weeping is good for us. Like the psalmist, the painful longing we have for home—an inherited memory, if you will—roots us in our identity and our purpose. It is our connection to reality—the reality of who we are, for what (for Whom) we were made, and for what (for Whom) we are waiting. To use the language of Peter, it is only by embracing our status as “sojourners and exiles” that we can “know what sort of people [we] ought to be in holy conduct and godliness” (2 Peter 3:11 NASB).

With this in mind, consider another psalm, Psalm 126, written by the Hebrews that returned to Jerusalem when the seventy years of captivity were completed.

“When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.” (Psalm 126:1-2 ESV)

Can you imagine the laughter of those exiles as they approached their homeland after so many years of weeping? And is there anything quite as powerful to the human spirit as a rich, wholesome, joyous laugh?

By His faithfulness, Jesus has delivered us from the captivity of sin (Romans 6:6), or to use Peter’s language, we have been “born again” (1 Peter 1:3,23), “ransomed” (1:18), brought “out of darkness” (2:9), and we have “returned to the Shepherd” (2:25). The Lord has restored our fortunes, and our mouths are filled with laughter.

And we should laugh. Not the cynical or superficial laughter of the world (see Luke 6:25), but the blessed laughter of those who drink deeply of God’s goodness. As Peter describes, “though you do not see him now, you believe in Him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:8-9 NASB). But there we are again, we do not yet see Jesus and we have not yet fully obtained our salvation.

So laugh, and weep. Weep, and laugh.

Weep for sin and for the brokenness that it has brought into our lives and the lives of those we care about. Weep for the pain of loss and separation that we are subject to while this age endures. And laugh for the joy that God has brought into our lives by freeing us from sin and giving us His Holy Spirit. Laugh for the certain hope that Jesus is coming back to set all things right and fulfill our deepest longings forever.

For, as the psalmist continues,

“Those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy! He who goes out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.” (Psalm 126:5-6 ESV)

And as our Lord has said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Luke 6:21).

Let your tears fall to the ground. Let them purify the soil of your heart so easily polluted by the world. Let your tears water the earth. And let them be planted like seeds that will bear the fruit of inexpressible joy, now and forever.

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