

The real capital city of Jerusalem

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[0 : 00] Just keep your fingers on Psalm 137. Let me remind you what happened last year, just recently last year on December 6th.

The United States of America, under Trump's administration, made a contagious statement recognizing Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel.

So this statement brought much too much controversy around the world and also many political and religious wranglings. Now as we are looking at Psalm 137, which is talking about remembering the holy city, Jerusalem of course, here are some of the questions I want us to think through as we go along through this Psalm 136.

The first question I want you to think of, should we use Psalm 137 as our basis to actually support the idea that Jerusalem should be the capital city of modern day Israel?

Should we really remember and think about the holy city being this physical Jerusalem? The other question I want you to think is, oh maybe we can say no, because we are Christians living after the cross, maybe our new Jerusalem is coming ahead of us.

[1 : 24] Maybe we are looking forward to seeing the new Jerusalem that is going to come from heaven, the one we read in Revelation chapter 21. Is it one that we can actually remember and think as we read Psalm 137, which is actually encouraging all the people of God to think of the holy city?

Or maybe Psalm 137 is just trying to tell us to be mindful of something completely different from all of these. So keep these questions in mind as we go through Psalm 137, which is talking about the love of the holy city.

Let me also, just from the beginning, give you a little bit of the historical background of this Psalm that we are reading. As you know that the historical background of the Psalm is the fall of Jerusalem.

It is the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonian Empire, the one that took place in 586 BC. And at that particular time, Jerusalem as the holy city was left in a complete disaster.

The temple was totally destroyed. And the people of Jerusalem and of Judah, they were all taken into captivity, where they stayed for about 70 years, up until the fall of Babylon in 539 by the Persians.

[2 : 51] So this happens simply because the Israelites broke a covenant with their God, Yahweh. If you are very familiar with the Old Testament, especially when you read all the way from Judges up to 2 Kings, you will know that it is because the Israelites broke the covenant with their God, Yahweh.

And the last thing that the Lord has decided to do is to chase them away from the land, because he was the landowner. He was the one who owned the promised land.

He had to decide to chase them away and to take them into exile. So Israel went through a serious spiritual decline to the point where it was completely difficult to bring them back to God.

God sent a lot of prophets to bring them back to himself, and it was difficult up until the last decision that the Lord came up with is just to chase them away. So when you read Psalm 137, it's actually a reflecting back to these events.

And it's not really clear whether at this particular time Babylon was already a thing of the past. It's very difficult. But when you read Psalm 137 from verse 1 and 2, you may conclude that by this particular time, because the writers using the past tense, by the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Jerusalem.

[4 : 19] So it seems to me like maybe at this particular time Babylon was already something of the past. But it's very difficult to tell, because when you just go straight in the last verse, let's look at

verse 8 for example, it seems like Babylon was still ruling at this particular time, because the writer is actually looking forward, he's looking ahead for the fall and the judgment of Babylon, or daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction.

So it seems like maybe at this particular time Babylon was still ruling, but that's not the point. The point that I want to make this morning is that the writer, whether Babylon was still ruling or not, but he was reflecting on those events that took place in 586, when Jerusalem became completely a disaster.

Psalm 137 is divided in three major stanzas, and all these three stanzas are well tied up together and unified by one common theme, the theme of remembering, and remembering in three different aspects.

The first aspect of remembering, which goes from verse 1 up to verse 4, where he uses the first person in singular, I mean the first person plural there, he remembers Zion, and the aspect of remembering there is the fact, remembering as a fact.

And the second stanza, which begins from verse 5 all the way up to verse 6, the second stanza, you will see again the theme of remembering comes again, but the aspect now of remembering has to do with a commitment or a vow that the writer is making to always remember the holy city, Jerusalem.

[6 : 15] And the last stanza, which goes from verse 7 up to the end of our psalm, is now looking forward, remembering what will happen, is asking God to remember the enemies of Jerusalem.

So it's all about the holy city, it's all about Jerusalem, we are talking about here. And so now what are we going to do this morning? I'm going to go through these stanzas, and then at the end I'm going to suggest two important messages that we can take home and reflect over the week.

First we will look at what is it that we can remember as Christians living in the 21st century. Should we also sit down and be mindful of the physical Jerusalem, or should we remember something else?

So I'll look at that one, what to remember. And the second thing I'll look at at the end is how do we deal with our enemies? Because the psalm is actually also looking forward to the judgment of the enemies of Jerusalem.

So as Christians living after the cross, what is it that we can do against our enemies? Let me start with our first stanza, which is talking about remembering Zion as a fact, from verse 1 to verse 4.

[7 : 33] So the writer begins by transporting himself back in history and joining the captives, joining the exiles in their sorrows and their miseries.

And there is trying by all means to show how much the love of the holy city was rooted in their hearts, the city of Jerusalem. Look at verse 1, for example.

It said, By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our hearts, for there our captives asked us for songs, our tormentors, demanded songs of joy.

They said, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. So from this stanza, you can tell, you can see how much the love for the city of God, Jerusalem, was actually rooted in the hearts of those who were taken into captivity.

He is trying to express how much all the people in Babylon were grieved because of what happened to Jerusalem. Jerusalem. And the grief that is being talked about here is not just an ordinary longing of a homeland.

[8 : 50] It's much more than that. It's not just a longing that happens usually when displaced people are taken far from their home. This is not that is happening here in Psalm 137.

The remembering that is taking place here, it is not remembering Jerusalem for the sake of Jerusalem. It's not remembering Zion for its own sake, but it's remembering Zion for what it stands for the people of God.

It's remembering Zion for what God has made it to stand for the people of God. So much that whenever they look back and see how much Jerusalem has been now destroyed, now they become sore consent and a whip for Jerusalem.

What is it that they remember when they think of Jerusalem, when they think of Zion, they remember the temple. The temple was more like a palace of the great king.

The temple was more like a throne room of the king where the Lord of the universe was ruling the whole universe from. The temple represented a lot of things in the faith and the mind of the Jews.

[10:00] It was not just the temple, even all the services that were taking place in the temple. They were remembering the godly men that were sitting and dwelling in Jerusalem and the mighty deliverances that God had brought for Jerusalem.

They were thinking of the dynasty of David, the house of King David that had a seat there in the holy city. They were also thinking of many journeys and pilgrimages that they were taking all the way from different towns to the city of Jerusalem.

So Jerusalem meant quite a lot in the minds of the captives because of what it meant and what it means when they remember Jerusalem, now it is a complete disaster.

They had to grieve. They had to weep in their minds. They had to cry because it's like it has gone against the belief of the Jewish people. That's why they are weeping.

That's why they are crying in Babylon. Even if many of them at this particular time they were living in comfort because some of them were living just well from the outside.

[11:08] But there was nothing to rejoice about in Babylon when they compare about what they believe in Zion. This is what they were crying and praying.

It was a valid reason. They were not weeping for the sake of weeping. They were weeping because they remembered Zion and Zion meant quite a lot in their belief. And if you consider again in the same stanza you see that they are even asked to sing a song of joy and they say they can't sing any song of joy in the land or in the foreign land.

And again there are valid reasons why they should know ahead. They should not go ahead and sing. We've got many psalms in the book of Psalms that encourage believers to sing a song of joy to the Lord but this is not just one of them.

This is a song about not to sing. They are not allowed to sing simply because they are grieved and they are in a foreign land. And the reason they give why they cannot sing is because they are in a foreign land.

Look at what they are saying. For there our captors in verse 3 our captors asked us for the songs and tormentors demanded songs of joy. They said sing us one of the songs of Zion.

[12:22] How can we sing the song of the Lord while in a foreign land? So this is the first reason why they give why they shouldn't sing is because they are not in Zion.

They are not in Zion they are just sitting by the rivers of Babylon. They are not at the river of Zion because in Zion there was a river even though physically and historically there was no any literal river but in their faith and belief there was a river of life that was flowing from the mountain of God and also going and reach all the worlds everywhere.

And as we see here they give the reason why they shouldn't sing is because of the location. It's not because they don't believe in the songs of Zion. It's not because they don't believe in what God is going to do for Zion.

Simply because they are in the wrong place. They are in a foreign land. They can't sing just the songs of Yahweh in a foreign land. And the other reason why they cannot sing is because they are being demanded to sing by their captors.

It was a way of mocking them. It was a way of trying to laugh at their faith to say where is your God? That's the reason why among all the songs they just choose the song of Zion.

[13:43] Sing us one song of Zion. Why are they talking about the songs of Zion? It's because the songs of Zion they are actually made in the book of Psalms. One of them is Psalm 46 for example and another one is for Psalms 84.

All the songs of Zion when you go through they are songs that are celebrating how much God is the king of Zion and how much difficult it is to defeat Zion. It is actually a song of sure security and much confidence in the God who reigns in Jerusalem and to say that Jerusalem can never be violated.

And the reason why Jerusalem can never be defeated and can never be shaken simply because that's a place where God is ruling. That's the place of the holy God. And it's very difficult to defeat. These are the songs of Zion. Whenever the Israelites met together and sing the song of Zion they were the songs of joy because they were celebrating how sure and how secure Zion was in the hands of God who was actually ruling in there.

Now the captives come and ask them to sing the song of Zion. In a way of mocking them to say where is your God? You've been singing all along that God is there to defend your Zion.

[14:59] He's there to defend your Jerusalem. Where is your God now? So for this reason they say we can't sing simply because you guys are busy tormenting us and giving us a lot of pressure to sing.

And the reason why we can't sing is not because we don't believe the words that we were singing about Zion but it's simply because we're in the wrong place. we can't sing them here.

We believe that we will still sing the song of Zion but not in this place. This is very surprising especially when you look at the situation where the Israelites were how much faith they had in their God.

Even when Jerusalem was completely destroyed totally destroyed the temple was completely down but their faith was not shaken. their faith in God was still there.

I don't know if you've noticed how they are calling these songs. Their captives are calling them the songs of Zion but look at the reply in verse 4. How can we sing the songs of the Lord?

[16:05] They are still the songs of the Lord to us. Even if we are in a foreign land these songs are the songs of the Lord. We truly believe that at one point or another we shall be able to sing the Lord.

So they are not doubting their faith. They are not actually shaken. They are not trying to say the content of the songs are wrong. They are simply saying we can't sing them here.

So they still believe that these songs are true. These songs are uplifting our faith. Even if we are in Babylon right now we still trust that these songs are the songs of Yahweh and we shall sing them one day.

Can you see how their faith was unshaken? Their faith was very stable because of how deep their love for Jerusalem was and how much their faith was in God, the God of Jerusalem.

So Jerusalem was destroyed but the God of Jerusalem was not. Jerusalem was completely down but the Lord was ruling all the world was still alive and the captors kept on tormenting them but the Israelites had faith in God.

[17:16] This is the first point where we see the Israelites putting their faith in God even when weeping even when in sorrow but they still put their faith in the Lord the God of Zion.

We truly believe that at one day one day we shall stand and sing the Lord's song. It doesn't matter what the captors are saying it doesn't matter what our enemies are trying to say and trying to make to prove that we are untrue because we have been singing wrong songs no our songs are not wrong we are just at the wrong place and we shall sing them one day.

This is very surprising the faith of the Israelites never shaken even when Jerusalem was down. This is the first stanza the first stanza is actually talking about the fact that they remembered Zion.

The second stanza now he moves the writer moves from we to I from a plural to singular and is now talking about Jerusalem in the first stanza he was talking about Zion and Jerusalem is just another name for Zion here now he is remembering as gone not from a fact to a vow from a fact to a commitment now he wants to make a commitment to always remember Jerusalem I will always remember Jerusalem as you can see now he is now talking as a spokesperson he is now moving from the plural to singular now in verse 5 if I forget he is speaking on behalf of all the Israelites in captivity if I forget you or Jerusalem may my right hand forget its skills may my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you if I do not consider

Jerusalem my highest joy this is a commitment this is a vow that is making that it is very impossible for me to forget Jerusalem to forget my holy city and he goes on to bring curses on himself should he forget should we not remember the holy city should he not should he not remember what God has done for the city of the people of God he goes on to say if I happen to forget Jerusalem may my right hands forget its skills to play music if I happen to forget Jerusalem may my tongue stick on the roof of my mouth that I cannot sing the reason why he is singing like this is because he knows that he uses his hands to play music and he uses his tongue to sing the music of Jerusalem now that these enemies are asking us to sing the song of joy we can never never try to go that route if we go that route

[20:18] God do something to stop us doing that if it means casing our right hand so that we may not sing do it Lord if it means our tongue should stick so that we cannot sing do it Lord the reason why we are making this commitment is simply because our love our deep love for Jerusalem is so strong that we can never forget we are making a commitment a vow that we shall never forget Jerusalem and nothing will ever replace the joy of the holy city there is nothing that will replace the joy of the holy city Jerusalem is our highest joy we shall never use any other thing person instead of

Jerusalem as our joy God help us this is a commitment that they are actually trying to make I was reading one of the Jewish writings commentary on this psalm it is amazing that one of the rabbis commented that every time when the

Jews and the Israelites meet for a wedding so verse 6 of this psalm should be read to the bridegroom when is waiting for the bride to come look at look at verse 6 he says if I don't remember you if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy these words should always be read to the bridegroom when is waiting for the bride to come why to remind him to say even the joy of marriage who never supersedes the joy of Jerusalem there is nothing nothing on earth that is going to go beyond the joy of the holy city there are a lot of things that makes us joyful we rejoice in them but nothing should take the place of Jerusalem is our highest and our greatest joy ever love this is amazing this is a great commitment that the person is making I think you can see how much the people of Israel were actually rooted in the love for the city of

God not for the sake of its honor as a city but because of what it meant in the faith of the Israelites so this is our second stanza where we see a commitment is made to always remember and never forget the city of God now in the last stanza he goes on a step further trying to address God to remember the enemies of Zion have a look at verse 8 verse 7 remember oh Lord what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell tear down they cried tear it down to its foundation verse 8 daughter of Babylon doomed to destruction happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us he who seizes you your infants and dashes them against the rocks these are some violent words that the writer is using now is addressing

God asking God to remember the enemies of Jerusalem and he picks the first enemies are the Edomites the Edomites are so close to the people of Israel because they are the descendants of Esau and these one they sided with the Babylonians on the day of Jerusalem when Jerusalem fell in the hands of the Babylonians the Edomites were not there to help their brothers instead they sided with the enemies and they actually managed to work together in order to bring down Jerusalem look at how bitter they were even how they were using their words to say tear down to its foundation what they meant is that we don't want to see Jerusalem any longer it must be completely destroyed right to the roots and so the writer of the song goes on to say God remember them remember and vindicate your people and now he goes to the

Babylonian themselves who are very cruel enemies wicked people and he said God these people we know already that they are doomed for destruction and they ask God now God may you just repay them can you treat them the way they treated us so this is a cry for justice this is a cry for judgment so as you can see all the three stanzas they around the theme of remembering and it's all about the holy city it's all about Jerusalem it's all about the city of God first I remembered we remember Jerusalem and secondly we will always remember you make a commitment to Jerusalem and thirdly he's now talking about God remember the enemies of Jerusalem so what can we take out of this psalm should we be very sympathetic about what is going on in the [25 : 42] Middle East and be mindful of the physical Jerusalem the Jerusalem of Benjamin Netanyahu and pray for Jerusalem based on Psalm 137 should we be mindful should we go and support everything that is going to be on the side of putting Jerusalem the modern day Jerusalem of the capital city I don't think this is what the writer is actually asking us to remember I don't think so I don't think either that the psalm is encouraging us to say we should be mindful of our new Jerusalem because we have our new Jerusalem that is coming ahead of us I don't think this is what the writer of the song is actually trying in the new week when we are reflecting on this psalm 137 is what is it that as

Christians of the 21st century the Bible is asking us to remember in connection with psalm 137 and so the first thing I want you to think of is remember that Zion in psalm 137 is a place where God has dealt with the sin of his people it's a place where God has judged the sin of the people of God so much that the day of Jerusalem that is actually explained here the day of Jerusalem was the day of God's anger it was the day that God's anger was poured and expressed at the sin of the people of God it was the day when God came against his own in wrath but there was another day coming there was another day of Jerusalem coming when God will again pour out the full measure of his wrath the full of his hunger on a hill just outside of

Jerusalem there also the Lord did not spare his own Zion becomes the way God has dealt with the sin of God's people Zion becomes the place where God has decided to come against his own in order to judge the sin of his people so much that when you look historically you will see that the first

place that God has chosen to judge the sin of God's people was exile and eventually the last place where God decided to judge the sin of the whole world is the cross so much that when we say we remember Zion we don't remember the physical Jerusalem we don't remember the new Jerusalem we remember the place where God decided to pour his anger we remember the cross we remember Jesus because it is on that cross that

God decided to turn away from his own it was on that cross that God had forsaken his own it was on that day that the Lord Jesus on the cross said Lord Lord why have you forsaken me the day that God decided to judge the sin of the whole world on the cross so as we remember Zion we remember the cross we remember the Lord Jesus Christ we remember the person who has provided salvation and forgiveness for our sins and you must know that is our highest joy that is our greatest joy ever the greatest joy is not the day that you were called grandmother it will never be the day that you will be called the mother or maybe the day of wedding or the day of marriage the greatest joy the greatest joy of all the believers is the day that the Lord decided to forgive our sins by judging our sin in the person of the

Lord Jesus Christ and now we are free indeed we can call each other sons and daughters of the kingdom of God we can call each other brothers and sisters not because we are saints but because we are forgiven sinners and we are forgiven sinners because the Lord on that day he decided not to he decided to of human beings so when we remember Zion we remember the Lord Jesus Christ and as we remember the Lord Jesus Christ we commit ourselves we make a commitment to always remember the Lord Jesus Christ even the way we live our lives out there should always be reflected in the way that these are the people that have been forgiven these are the people that the Lord has actually cherished their sons and daughters of the kingdom of God our way of life the way we live our style wherever we go out there should reflect that for sure we remember the cross we don't remember passively we remember as we live a life that is glorifying our

[31 : 00] Lord Jesus Christ so much whenever we tell people that we shall never forget Jerusalem we shall never forget the cross and the person of Lord Jesus Christ that should always be reflected in the way we live our lives the way we cherish and the way we live as brothers and sisters should always be a reflection that we really remember that that's our commitment and I'm here to tell you this morning that as you go out of this place and wherever you go never never forget the greatest joy of all believers the greatest joy of all believers is the day the Lord has decided not to count our sins anymore and we are sinners but we go with confidence the Lord is our father simply because the Lord has decided to forgive our sins what a joy there's no joy that goes beyond the joy of remembering the cross and remembering the person of our Lord Jesus Christ this is the first thing I want you to think of as you go through

Psalms 137 the second thing I want you to think of is how do you deal with your enemies how do you deal with the wicked people those who have done to you or to the people of God even atrocious things what do we do so many Christians when they come and I've seen in some of the liturgies and some of the prayer books the two last verses many people think they don't reflect the way a believer should pray because they seem so violent you know all daughter of Babylon doomed to destruction happy is one who repays you for what you have done to us look at the last verse it says he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks so violent this is how the writer is actually asking God to do against their enemies should we pray like that against our enemies of course we know for sure that

God is God of love and because we are the people of God we should also display the love of God we don't want to see the suffering of our enemies but we should also know for sure that God for God to express fully his love he must also express his justice he must show how much God is able to vindicate the people of God so the justice and the love of God they go hands in hands it is on the cross where we see the justice and mercy of God meeting together it is at the cross where we see the justice of God and the love of God meeting together so there's no love without justice of course when we pray against our enemies we are not taking revenge we know that the Bible is telling us that revenge belongs to God vengeance belongs to God this is exactly what the writer is actually doing here he's not taking part in revenge but he's asking

God of vindication to vindicate them he's actually trusting God's promises to vindicate them because he knew for sure that God had already promised to bring Babylon down and he's asking God to just fulfill his promises as the church we pray that God will vindicate the people of God and God will bring justice in this world we are not taking part in the judgment we are not being people

who are revenge but we take it back to the Lord we know for sure that God has got means and ways that he can deal with our enemies it's either deal them he deal with them in the cross by forgiving them or in judgment by taking them away and this is how the Lord is doing our cry as a church all over the world as we see the atrocious things happening we pray that may your will be done we pray that may you do justice and God knows the best way to do justice he meets with some of our enemies at the cross by forgiving them and meet with some of our enemies outside of the cross by judging them because he's the

Lord God of justice and what the Bible is not asking us to do is to revenge but we can cry a cry for justice before the Lord so these are the two things that I want you to take out of this Psalm 137 as you reflect on this it's not asking us cry for justice we trust that the Lord will fulfill his promises let's pray Lord we thank you because we are the Lord of justice the Lord of love and you are the Lord who has met us on the cross at the foot of cross Lord where we were fully forgiven and my prayer that God is that as we move out of this place day by day we shall always remember the cross the place of our forgiveness the place where we were forgiven and reconciled to our father and our lives on a daily basis will reflect the fact that we are people who will never forget

[36 : 29] Jesus Amen