

There they were in Babylon, captives of a kingdom which had conquered them. But the Children of Israel were not conquered and taken captive because the Babylonians were so much stronger, but because Israel had abandoned their covenant with their God, Yahweh, and therefore when they went to war against the Babylonians, they fought on their own, without the power of Yahweh Sabbaoth, the Lord of Hosts.

Yahweh had sent prophet after prophet, warning Israel that this very thing would befall them unless they repented, right up until the final prophet before their captivity, Jeremiah. Jeremiah told them that the captivity *would now happen*, even if they repented immediately! He told them that it was too late to stave off the judgment that had been promised for centuries of continued disobedience. It was coming, sure and certain. Jeremiah was told to deliver the message that the captivity was surely coming, that its duration would be 70 years, and that there was nothing they could do about it. Nothing of course other than believe that as God had brought it, God intended to end it. They hated Jeremiah for delivering this true message from God, and they persecuted, punished and even tried to kill him. After all, the prophets were supposed to warn them beforehand, right? He did. They had.

All went as Jeremiah had said it would, and now there they were, in Babylon, captive, hurt, heartbroken, longing for home and Jerusalem... ahh, Jerusalem, the nerve center of all of Judaism... the place of the temple where the presence of God was resident within the Holy of Holies, the place of the aroma of the sacrifices, the place of the Glory of God.

But that was far away now and the Children of Israel felt like fish out of water. They had been in the Promised land since Joshua had brought them in some 900 or so years before. 900 years is a long time... you begin to call a place home by that time, no? Israel seemed like home and it was home! In fact, it was a home that had been intended by God to be the *eternal* home of the Jews!

This longing was put to song; but not a celebratory song; a lament, actually. We can read that lamenting song in Psalm 137. The word Psalm, Hebrew mizmor, actually means song.

The Babylonians wanted some entertainment from their Hebrew captives, so they requested some music. Rather than giving their captives what they requested, the Children of Israel, cried a lament.

Psalm 137, verse 3 reads, "*For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song, and those who plundered us requested mirth, Saying, 'sing us one of the songs of Zion!'*".

But the Children of Israel couldn't do it. They said amongst themselves, "*How shall we sing Yahweh's song in a foreign land?*" (verse 4)

That raises a question for us, does it not? Why could they not sing Yahweh's song no matter where they were? Of course they could sing Yahweh's song wherever they were! Surely they did so when traveling, when visiting family abroad, when those of the army were out on the way to battle, etc. What then could be meant by singing Yahweh's song, such that they could not do it in this foreign land? We have only to read the next verse, 5, for our answer. “*If I forget you O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget [her skill/cunning/abilities].*” So singing the songs of Yahweh has something to do with Jerusalem (the name Zion from verse 3 is another name for Jerusalem; it's one of the mountains therein).

But what if one lived all the way up in Dan in the north, or all the way down in Beersheba in the south? Could not the songs of Yahweh be sung by His people in places other than Jerusalem? Of course they could! What is going on here in the mind of this Psalmist?

When the Jew referenced Zion, or Jerusalem, he was usually not speaking geographically. Jerusalem was the nerve center of Judaism itself. Jerusalem was the place where legitimate sacrifices were made and where Temple worship took place.

Jerusalem was where atonement for all the people was made.

Jerusalem was where the priests, the tribe of Levi served.

Jerusalem was where the Temple was, in which abode the very presence of God. The very word Jerusalem symbolized all that *Judaism* did, indeed, was!

Could there even be a Judaism without Jerusalem? In one sense, yes, of course. A Jew is one no matter where he/she is. In another sense, no, of course not. What were the Jews called to do... Moses and all the Levitical Law; and that happened in Jerusalem.

Where were the Jews called to pilgrimage and to hold their festivals? Jerusalem.

Where was the place where God “settled” upon His presence resting, in the land that God had said was His, and which He had given to the Jews? Jerusalem.

The Jews in captivity could not do what Jews do, apart from Jerusalem.

Not too long ago, I'd say April or May 2020, I received as a member of a clergy group, what called itself a helpful document from a para-church organization, making suggestions to churches on ways to embrace their “new normal”; how churches could restructure, reorganize, revamp, retool in order to accommodate all the “new” restrictions being put on them by their state and local governments.

There were recommendations such as doing away with hymn books and bulletins so that people wouldn't touch things that other people had touched. Suggestions that doing away with coffee hour fellowship times was now essentially, essential. Sunday school was to be eliminated as was any time spent in the sanctuary after the services. Donations were to be made electronically because money could spread disease. Communion

elements would be individually wrapped if present at all.

The document informed churches to get used to this list of 24 categories, each containing numerous things that would have to be changed/ended/stopped in order to accommodate the new realities/mandates of 2020. In item number two, immediately after telling churches in item 1 that they have more than just the two options of “open” or “closed”, they follow up with this “helpful” statement;

**“What has to change:** *Your church will never go back to normal. Learn which aspects of ministry will be changed forever, and how you can adapt*”.<sup>1</sup>

Let me tell you how I read that, Loved Ones. If I forget Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning.

If my church never goes back to normal, it will be because **we** have decided to change something from our norms, or because of some unavoidable tragedy or some such thing, but it will never be because a governmental agency, regulator, bureaucrat or captor has told us that what we do is illegal and now banned. Never.

When the people of God are prevented by some will other than God's and their own, from doing what the people of God do, they are to vow, promise pledge to return thereto with all that is in them and never let down. They are to remember it, not as a thing of the past, thought of with fondness, but as a thing *never to be forsaken*; a thing to be cherished, preserved, even eternally.

*“May my right had lose its cunning”* is a curse, Beloved! Allow me to paraphrase... the psalmist is saying, *“Let me be cursed if I do not regard the legitimate, appropriately ordained worship of Yahweh to be to me a thing eternal, not to be forsaken, nor forgotten, but to be returned to as soon as is humanly possible, and to be maintained. Ever.”*.

Captivity? Perhaps. Voluntary captivity? Never.

The Jews had been told by Jeremiah that they were to do the best they could in Babylon. They were to go along with the Babylonian laws and wait for the day that they would return to the Land, for they had received that promise from Yahweh that they would/could return in 70 years. During that time, they were to long for the return to Jerusalem/Judaism and all that it meant. Do you doubt this? One can read at the end of the Chronicles how God Himself moved upon the heart of a Persian king to make this happen, to facilitate it and even fund it! The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell of this Glorious return made possible by God inspiring the most unlikely of sources, pagan

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of this document can be obtained in its original format at <https://cbamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Overseed-Church-Reopening-Checklist.pdf>

kings! Jerusalem would be restored. Yahweh worship was to be restored in the nerve center of Judaism: Jerusalem. Yahweh Himself would see to it.

Why do you suppose that now, even now, some 2500+ years after the writing of Psalm 137, Jerusalem is still “the thing” for the Jewish people, and recognized as such by the rest of the world? Why was it such a big deal that Presidents for decades had promised to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capitol and had not? Why was it such a big deal when President Trump, and then several other nations following his lead, did?

Psalm 137 is a vow that those whom love Yahweh have taken; that we do not forsake Yahweh worship and embrace some arbitrarily imposed “new normal”. Should we be restricted/unable to worship Him as we ought, we “remember” it always, vowing to never forget... until we are restored. “*Your church will never go back to normal*” is a thought/sentence that I reject as faithless, godless and wrong.

We are the people of the book. We are those who gather in His name and who will never forget, and *will* once again gather and worship as we ought, greeting one another with a holy kiss, speaking to each other in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs... practices not allowed by executive orders in some of these United States.

Psalm 137 is a vow to such, Loved Ones. Let us take it together.

Pastor