

END OF PSALM 136

You are Psalms

Some people think you never get discouraged, but the fact is, when you do, you know where to run. Your prayers are open and honest because you realize that God already knows your heart, He's just waiting to hear you spill it. And when you do, what starts out as heavy ends up becoming a song of praise. You may struggle... and often you do... but each time, you grow in your understanding of God's faithfulness. You're just a song waiting to happen.

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PSALMS (SONGS OF PRAISE)

TRUST
IN THE
LORD *and do good;
dwell in the land and
enjoy safe pasture.*
PSALM 36: 3

PSALM NUMBER: 136

The lamentation of the people of God in their captivity in Babylon.

1. Upon the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept: when we remembered Sion:
2. On the willows in the midst thereof we hung up our instruments.
3. For there they that led us into captivity, required of us the words of songs. And they that carried us away, said: Sing ye to us a hymn of songs of Sion.
4. How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land?
5. If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten.
6. Let my tongue cleave to my jaws, if I do not remember thee: if I make not Jerusalem the beginning of my joy.
7. Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom, in the day of Jerusalem. Who say: Raze it, raze it, even to the foundation thereof.
8. O daughter of Babylon, miserable: blessed shall he be who shall repay thee thy payment which thou hast paid us.
9. Blessed he that shall take and dash thy little ones against the rock.

The Psalms are songs of praise and cover a period of about 1000 years, from the time of Moses (ca. 1400 B.C.) to the Israelites' return from exile (ca. 450 B.C.). They deal with selected events of that period and provide us with the thoughts and feelings of those who went through the experiences recorded. After being made a Cardinal by Pope Clement VIII, Saint Robert Bellarmine, prepared for posterity his very own commentary on each of the Psalms. Enclosed are his interpretations on each of the Psalms.

PSALM NUMBER: 136

EXPLANATION OF THE PSALM

1. "Upon the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept when we remembered Sion." Such was the language of the captives who were brought away from Jerusalem to Babylon, and who were not detained in this city, but were employed in various laborious tasks through the country, along the banks of the rivers, in which the province abounded, on which they would seat themselves betimes, and burst into tears, at the recollection of, and through longing for their country. When he says, "the rivers of Babylon," we are not to understand that all of these rivers ran through the city; for it is well known that the Euphrates was the only river that ran through it, and the expression, therefore, includes the country about Babylon; or, perhaps, by Babylon, he means the province of that name, as Samaria, the city, gave its name to the country about it. In a spiritual sense, such is the language of God's elect, who are held here below in captivity, are inwardly detached from the world, and know themselves to be citizens of the Jerusalem above, for such holy exiles sit on the banks of the rivers, instead of being hurried away by their waters, and rolled along to the sea. The rivers of Babylon mean the temporal things of this world; and when one gets attached to them by his desires, such as the avaricious, the ambitious, the voluptuary, they are carried away by the rapids, and hurled headlong into the sea, into the great abyss, to be punished there for eternity. Here, then, is the position of the citizens of the country above, and the first distinctive mark to tell anyone to which people he belongs, for they who are in a high position in this world, and still have their hearts in heaven, and long for the things of this world, these are they who belong to Jerusalem, and not to Babylon. Again: the aforesaid "fellow citizens with the Saints" "sit on the banks of the rivers," on a very low spot; they seek not an elevated one, they have no desire for place or power: they pride themselves not on their wisdom; and should they chance to be raised to rule over a Babylon, as was the case with David, and many Christian kings, however high their position may be, their ideas do not go up with it, nor do they look upon their elevation as a honor, but as a burden, under which to groan; and, instead of glorying in it, as far as they are personally concerned, they will seek to sit in the lowest place, if they have the true spirit of him "who was meek and humble of heart." Thirdly, they will not only seat themselves lowly down, but they will lament and deplore, not the loss of the things of this world, but their own captivity, when they bring their sweetest country to their recollection, that of Mount Sion. They who forget it fraternize with the children of Babylon; but they who long for it, and whose longings cause them to remember their country, however prosperous they may be, they do not feel satisfied, but still sigh for

who kept not their principality, but forsook their own habitation, he hath reserved in everlasting chains, unto the judgment of the great city.” And it is not only the devil that Christ will tie down in everlasting chains, he will also bind down the worldlings, who persecuted the pious, and kept them in captivity; for the Angels will bind them up “in bundles to be burned.” And, as the same king of Babylon makes the little ones of Christ, they will have not grown up nor advanced in Christ, and always need milk, the principal objects of his snares, in order to bring them away captives; so, on the contrary, blessed is he, who, by a happy dash on the rock, kills sin, those who have not been too deeply stained with it, that they may live in justice.

their country, and the severest test we can apply to ourselves, as to whether we belong to Babylon or to Jerusalem, is to reflect on what pleases us, or what delights us, for “where our treasure is, there our heart will be also.”

2. “On the willows in the midst thereof we hung up our instruments.” The Jews, in their captivity, hung up their musical instruments “on the willows in the midst thereof” of Babylon, that all its inhabitants may see how they threw away those instruments of joy, in order to show that they were more inclined to weep than to sing. Pious souls are fond of doing the same; for when they come to understand fully their exile and banishment, they say with the same Prophet, “my soul refused to be comforted; I remembered God and was delighted;” for though the citizens of the celestial Jerusalem cannot rejoice and sing with the Babylonians, nor of their success and prosperity, still they sing, in their hearts, to God, and rejoice in the hope of future happiness. “We hung up our instruments” means the consigning of those instruments of joy and pleasure to the votaries thereof, who, like so many unproductive trees, are daily watered by the rivers of Babylon, and produce no fruit. Let such people for whom eternal wailing is in store hereafter, strike the harp, and burst forth in song here.

3. “For there they then led us into captivity, required of us the words of songs. And they that carried us away, said: Sing ye to us a hymn of the songs of Sion.” The captive Jews hung up their harps on the branches of the trees, not only through grief and sadness, but also that they may not oblige the Babylonians, who were anxious to hear and to mock the sacred hymns they were wont to sing on their holy festivals. St. John Chrysostom observes the improvement such tribulation effected in the Jews, who previously derided, nay, even put the death, some of the prophets; but now that they were captives in the foreign land, they would not attempt to expose their sacred hymns to the ridicule of the Gentiles.

4. “How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land?” Such was their answer when asked, “Sing ye to us a hymn of the songs of Sion.” They say that such is their longing and grief for their country, that they cannot possibly sing while so removed from it, fearing to give offense to their masters, by telling them the principal reason, which was, for fear of their sacred hymns being turned into ridicule. In a spiritual view, holy souls, citizens of the Jerusalem above, feeling that rejoicing is suited to their country, and lamentation to their exile and captivity, exclaim, how can we sing amidst so many dangers and temptations! “Laughter I counted error; and to mirth I said: why art thou vainly deceived?” They, too, sing the songs of the Lord in a strange land, who sing sacred hymns and chants in such a manner as to please the ear, seeking only to catch it by various inflections and variations, never considering that sacred music was intended to raise the soul to God rather than please the senses. There are to be found too, some who will bring the songs of Babylon into the house of God and into holy Sion, who so adapt sacred words to profane tunes as to cause the audience to attend exclusively to the air, and overlook the meaning of such hymns.

5. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand be forgotten."
6. "Let my tongue cleave to my jaws, if I do not remember thee: if I may not Jerusalem the beginning of my joy." They who said, "how shall we sing the song of the Lord in a strange land?" The whole people, as if they formed only one person, are introduced, swearing unanimously, and resolving firmly, that they will never forget their country; and, as the striking the harp or chanting of a hymn, may be construed into a sign of their forgetting their country, they pray to God with a solemn imprecation, that the hand that strikes the harp may wither, and the tongue that sings the song may be, paralyzed. "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem," as I certainly will, when I strike the harp in a foreign land, "let my right hand be forgotten." May it rot and perish, and be of no use, in which case it will be forgotten," let my tongue cleave to my jaws," so that it will not be able to move, if I not only forget thee, but if I do not even go further, and "make Jerusalem, the beginning of my joy;" make the holy city of Jerusalem the beginning and the sum total of my joy. Such, in fact, is the peculiarity and the distinguishing mark of the elect, if they neither in prosperity nor adversity lose sight of their future country, and would not hesitate in losing hand or tongue, should God's glory, and their own eternal salvation require it, and if they take no real pleasure in anything but in longing and hoping for that celestial home that is not made by the hand of man, where is to be found that joy of which the Lord speaks in the Gospel, when he says, "enter into the joy of thy Lord."
7. "Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom, in the day of Jerusalem. Who say: raze it, raze it, even to the foundation thereof."
8. "O daughter of Babylon, miserable: Blessed shall he be who shall repay thee thy payment which thou hast paid us."
9. "Blessed he that shall take and dash thy little ones against the rock." In the end of the Psalm, David predicts the destruction of the children of Edom, and the Babylonians who thus persecuted the children of Israel. The Babylonians, under King Nabuchodonosor, sacked Jerusalem, and brought its inhabitants away captives to Babylon. The Idumeans, the descendents of Esau, who was also called Edom, had encouraged them to it; that is clearly related by Abdias the prophet, and David prophesies it here long before it happened; and David therefore takes up the Idumeans first, either because they were the originators of so much misery to the Jews, or because he chose to take up first those who had been guilty of the lesser injury "Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem," in the days when Jerusalem was sacked and demolished, and he then tells what they did. "Who say: raze it, raze it, even to the foundation thereof," for such was their language to the Babylonians when they were marching against it. When he says, "remember," it means remember to punish, as God is said to forget when he forgives; thus, in Ezekiel, "I will not remember all his iniquities which he hath done;" and in Tobias, "neither remember my offenses, nor those of my parents." He then turns to Babylon, and by way of imprecation, foretells its destruction. "O daughter of Babylon, miserable" as I foresee you will be, however happy you may seem to be now. "Blessed shall he be who shall repay thee thy payment which thou hast paid us,"

blessed will be the king of the Medes and Persians, for he will succeed in conquering you, and will indict all the hardships on you, that you have indicted on us, as eventually happened. And he further prophesies that such will be the cruelty of the Medes and Persians, that they "will take and dash thy little ones against the rock," and thus show them not the slightest mercy. All this has a spiritual meaning. First, in an allegorical sense, looking upon the Idumeans as the Jews, and the Babylonians as the pagans; for, in point of fact, it was the pagans that principally sought to tear up the Church of Christ from its very foundations, and that on the suggestion, counsel, and exhortation of the Jews; for it was upon the charges made by the Jews, that the pagans passed sentence of death on Christ. Herod put St. James to death, and bound St. Peter with chains, "seeing it was agreeable to the Jews;" and the same Jews did all that in them lay, to get the Romans to put St. Paul to death. In various other places, and at various other times, the same Jews "stirred up and incensed the minds of the Gentiles against the brethren," as we read in the Acts; but God "remembered" both Jews and Gentiles, to punish the one and the other. He razed their chief city, upset their kingdom, and scattered themselves all over the world; and he so swept away the pagan empire and kingdoms, who then held the whole world in sway, as not to leave scarce a pagan power now in existence. And, as idolatry and pagan rule have been supplanted, not by violence or force of arms, but by the preaching of God's word, the Prophet addresses God, saying, "Blessed shall he be who shall repay thee thy payment which thou hast paid us," for the pagans most unsuccessfully persecuted the Christians, who, in return, most successfully persecuted them. It would have been of the highest advantage to them, if, on the extinction of idolatry, they had died to sin and began to live to justice, as occurred to their children, who had not been so deeply rooted in the errors and devices of paganism. For it is a well known fact that an immense number of the youth and other simpleminded persons were easily converted to the Christian religion, and held out even unto death for it against the idolatry of their fathers, allusion to which is made in the words, "Blessed be that shall take and dash thy little ones against the rock;" that is to say, who shall bring the little ones to the rock, Christ, to get a fortunate dash against it, and die the death of the old man, to rise a new man. Secondly, to take this passage in a moral point of view, we may look upon the Idumeans as representing the carnal, and the Babylonians as the evil spirits, and it is more in the spirit of the Psalm; for, as we set out with it, the captivity of Babylon was a type of the captivity of mankind, a captivity still to some extent in existence, and will, "as long as the flesh lusteth against the spirit," and the elect exclaim, "who will deliver me from the body of this death?" And the apostle says, "even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption of the sons of God, the redemption of our body;" and, finally, we are but "pilgrims and strangers" in a foreign land; and though not belonging to it, we are in the midst of a wretched world. God, then, will repay to Babylon for Babylon imposed upon us; for, the evil spirit, the king of Babylon, bound us with a chain that still hangs on the neck of all the children of Adam, so, on the day of judgment, will Christ, the King of Jerusalem, lead the evil spirit captive, and will so tie him down with the chains of eternal punishment, then he will never rise again to do any harm; of which St. Jude speaks when he says, "and the Angels