

Ashland Brethren in Christ – Sunday, September 23, 2018

How to Read an Old Testament Curse

Psalm 137

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 24:44-49 (24:25-27)

The Psalms are the “prayer book of the church” – in fact you will sometimes find traditional Christian groups whose only songs for Sunday Worship are the Psalms, set to music or chant.

That’s fine for Psalms like the 23rd: “The Lord is my shepherd...” That song is full of restful and encouraging imagery. But what about the “curse” Psalms, like 109: “May his days be few... may his children be fatherless... may the creditor seize all he has... let there be none to show kindness to him...” Or, consider the Psalm before us today: 137. It begins beautifully, though sad, and then ends with a stunning curse. *[Read Psalm 137]*

What do you think? Can we pray this Psalm with understanding and meaning? Or is it better just skipped over and ignored, as one of those embarrassing Old Testament passages that we wish did not exist?

Christians through the ages have struggled with these questions, and from the beginning found ways to read and apply these kinds of scriptures to their lives. Here are a few tips to help us in that struggle:

(1) First, let’s ask “What does the passage mean in its historical context? What is being said, and what is its original purpose? Does it have any application to my life in that context?”

In the case of Psalm 137, this song remembered and grieved the loss of Jerusalem and the temple built by Solomon. In 586 BC, the Babylonians sacked the city, tore down the temple, and took most of the leaders and producers into captivity. They were settled in various camps far from home. This psalm combines a mournful memory of what was lost, with a wrathful curse their captors.

(2) The second key question is: “How does the passage say something about Jesus?”

Why would we assume that it would? Well, for one thing, Jesus himself said it did. *[Read Luke 24:44-49 (24:25-27)]*

After his resurrection, Jesus told the disciples how “everything written about

me in Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” And so in the light of Christ, and in the guidance of the Apostles, the early Christians dug deep into the scriptures to find Jesus there. How did the Lord they knew and loved fulfill this Psalm, or how was he foreshadowed there?

(3) Our third question: “How does the passage serve as an example for us?” Paul taught this key to the Corinthians as part of his longer teachings to them about proper Christian behavior and service. *[Note 1 Cor 10:6 and 10:11]*

Christians came to understand that the Old Testament scriptures were not just history and sayings of long-vanished people, but they were spiritual lessons to be read as examples both positive (“you also strive to live like this”) and negative (“strive instead to live differently than these”).

(4) A fourth question: “How did the early church read and apply this passage?” Now, admittedly, this one might be a little tough – we simply may not know. A good reference commentary or Bible encyclopedia can be helpful with this, but even then, you may not be able to find out. Still, it’s a good question to ask, and can help illuminate an otherwise dark passage.

So, bringing it all together, how can these questions help us with our Psalm?

Historically, it’s likely that none of us experience this kind of literal loss of city and home due to persecution or captivity, but it is not difficult to think of examples of other Christians through history, or in other parts of the world who have. Do they continue to “sing the Lord’s song” while in a strange land? Think here of Paul and Silas, who sang hymns at midnight while chained up in prison. Could this Psalm be a kind of negative example to us: when in mourning, *don’t* hang up your harps!

But what about the curse? There is, perhaps, a time and place when you can sing a “curse psalm” and mean it. The Psalms as a whole reflect a wide range of emotion, from utter despair to utter joy. It is not wrong to express yourself in those same words, to the Lord who knows the depths of your heart. We may truly feel that an enemy should be devastated like we have been, and we may say so to God.

But can we stay there? What did Jesus have to say about that? “You have heard it said love your friends and hate your enemies, but I tell you: love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”

Is there way, then, to read and sing this Psalm that is of benefit to us while at the same time helping us to move on from literally cursing enemies? Here’s

where our other key questions come into play. The early Christians read this Psalm too, and saw in it both a reference to Christ, and an example for us to follow. Do you see it yet?

It helps in this case to recall that by the time of the New Testament, “Babylon” was no longer a world power, but that name had taken on the symbolic meaning of any power that brought spiritual oppression and bondage. Think of that chapter in Revelation that describes a wicked, blood-soaked persecutor of the church as “Babylon” (Revelation 17-18).

When these Christians read Psalm 137, they saw “Babylon” there, and they understood that “Babylon” was a symbol for all the fallen world’s traps and temptations. Then, Babylon’s “little ones” are those *same* troubles, those same sins and bondages, but still small, and more easily beaten.

And so they would pray something like this: “Blessed is the person who recognizes the little things that lead to pain and destruction, and who deals with them when they are yet small, before they have a chance to grow into monsters that are far harder to kill.”

This was already the common understanding of Psalm 137 by the time St. Benedict wrote his Rule for monastic life (sometime around AD 530). Here is a reference to it from his Prologue:

*But let us ask the Lord, with the Prophet,
“Lord, who shall dwell in Your tent,
or who shall rest upon Your holy mountain” (Ps. 15:1)?*

*After this question, brothers and sisters,
let us listen to the Lord
as He answers and shows us the way to that tent, saying,
“The one Who walks without stain and practices justice;
who speaks truth from his heart;
who has not used his tongue for deceit;
who has done no evil to his neighbor;
who has given no place to slander against his neighbor.”*

*This is the one who,
under any temptation from the malicious devil,
has brought him to nothing (Ps. 15:4)
by casting him and his temptation from the sight of his heart;
and who has laid hold of his thoughts
while they were still young
and dashed them against Christ (Ps. 15:4; 137:9).*

Did you catch that last line? It answers our question: “where is Jesus in this Psalm?” He is the Rock.

In moments of temptation, or confusion, or loss, if we can recognize the situation, we can pray even the simple prayer “Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And he, the Apostle Paul assures us, will “provide the way out”.

Now... is it possible to understand every difficult or troubling passage in the Old Testament in this way? These key questions today can help, but in the end, you may find a passage is still too offensive, or that it seems pointless. And it's OK in that case to just set it aside. That scripture or psalm just may not be something for you right now. The Holy Spirit can bring you around to it again later, when the message in it, and your life, line up.

May the God of wisdom and light bless you and bring you understanding as you seek to read all the scriptures and seek to live them out in faith and faithfulness... Amen.