

The Exiled Nation (585-535 BCE)

Psalms of a People in Exile

Readings: *Psalms 102, 106, 123, 137*

Reflections:

- Psalm 102 has this title: “A prayer for an afflicted man. When he is faint and pours out his lament before the Lord.” This well describes this psalm. Loss of meaning of life, loss of appetite, isolation, weeping: these are the conditions for someone experiencing depression. The psalmist intentionally focuses himself on God’s character of compassion, sovereignty in his perfecting timing, and commitment to the desperate and poor. “Let this be written down for a future generation...” The psalmist also has a sense of bringing glory to God beyond his own life and having a desire to create a legacy of worship to God through the story of his life. He looks beyond his own life and sees a future day: “...when the peoples of the kingdoms of the earth assemble to worship the Lord.” We see here again how critical it is to understand God’s unfolding story and then to be able to see yourself within that unfolding story. For those struggling with depression from difficult circumstances, it enables the person committed to God to look beyond their immediate problems and see how they can still be a part of God’s bigger story. The psalmist that started with no sense of hope for life ends with confidence in God’s eternal will and commitment to his people.
- Psalm 106 is a retelling of Israel’s story. We see here again for those that are suffering how critical it is to be able to remember and retell to ourselves all that God has done in the past so that in times of difficulty we can remember the true nature of God. We see again in this psalm that this writer connects their present suffering with their rebellion against God and looks back and openly acknowledges that, “We have sinned, even as our fathers sinned.” In retelling the story of Israel he walks through all of Israel’s sin (and there was a lot) to set up this verse: “But he took note of their distress when he heard their cry; for their sake he remembered his covenant and out of his great love he relented.” Here we see insights that are again helpful to those who are struggling: 1) Be honest about where your own mistakes or failures have contributed to your problems (don’t just try to blame God for everything); 2) In crying out to God, trust that God will remember the new covenant he made through Christ, a covenant of complete grace and forgiveness; 3) Anticipate that God’s great love will again meet your need.

- Psalm 123 is a short psalm that could probably be said over and over as a form of meditation. Key thought? "...so our eyes look to the Lord our God till he shows us his mercy." This is a great reminder to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author (starter) and perfecter (finisher) of our faith..." (Hebrews 12:2). The challenge during times of difficulty is to not be distracted by our painful and difficult circumstances and to lose our focus on Jesus and our trust in him. (See Phil. 1:3-5)
- Psalm 137 is explicit about the time and location of this psalm of lament. "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion." People have an innate desire for home and security. This may be an actual place or it may be a relationship or a sense of right fit with the circumstances of life. As slaves they were asked to sing the Hebrew songs and this only made it worse. As the psalmist concludes his bitter anger leads him to write one of the most offensive verses in Scripture, "happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us – he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." If the psalmist believes that this is ultimately God's heart, this psalmist is sadly mistaken. As we will see with the coming of Jesus, God's heart is for all people. He is a God who shows mercy to his enemies and calls all those who would follow him to "love our enemies" even as he loved us even when we were still living as his enemies. (See Matthew 5:43-44; Luke 6:27-35; Romans 5:10; Romans 12:19-21; Colossians 1:21-23; Ephesians 2:1-10). This psalm does remind us though that sometimes our prayers don't end on the right note. Sometimes we pray and just stay in a very negative space. God is bigger than us and so we can trust that even when we are so angry and discouraged that we don't get it right, God will still love us and work with us and continue to lead us into his purposes.