

THE GLORY OF WORSHIP  
Psalm 137

One thing you'll notice about me if you hang around me very long is that I have long nails on my right hand. Not my left hand, just my right hand. No, it's not a fashion thing; no, I'm not making a social statement. There is a reason I have long nails on the right hand- I play the classical guitar and in order to produce a nice sound it really helps to have long nails on your picking hand. They've been like this since I was 15 years old (my wife thought I was very strange when she first met me and noticed.)

I have always loved the guitar, ever since I started playing my dad's old guitar when I was 12 years old. I don't get to practice or perform like I used to, but I can't imagine not playing. However, there was one time when I quit playing. I was a junior in high school and I was starting to very serious about my faith. I had read the book "The Cost of Discipleship" by Deitrich Bonhoeffer and I wanted to be a serious disciple and to get rid of anything that would stand between me and God. Consequently, my brother and I burned all of our heavy metal records (anybody remember records?). And I remember telling God that I would give up anything for Him, including my guitar, which was my most prized possession.

Now, I didn't give up playing my guitar for good, and I'm not sure the Lord ever asked me to. But, I wonder, would many of us be willing to give up our most treasured activities and possessions if they got in the way of knowing God? By the way, this is the idea behind fasting and spiritual disciplines: to take our focus off of those things which seem essential (eating!) in order to put our focus on the one thing which is essential.

As you read Psalm 137, I want you to listen to the writer's priorities and especially his attitudes towards worship and the church. This Psalm is written during a very difficult time in the life of the nation of Israel. It's written long after many of the other Psalms in the Bible, about 400 years after David lived. If you're familiar with the history of the Old Testament, you know that after David and Solomon, the kings of Israel began to lead the nation toward ruin and eventually, in 586 BC, the Babylonians came and conquered Israel, destroying the temple and taking the Israelites away.

*Worship is Sacred*

At the beginning of the Psalm, verses 1-4, we get a picture of the Jews who have been taken from their homeland and forced to live in a foreign country. Why are the people weeping? Because they remember Zion. Now, what is Zion? Zion is more or less synonymous with Jerusalem. It's the holy city of the Jews because that's where Solomon built the temple. To them, it's more than just a pretty place or a hometown. Many of us have a strong reaction of pride when we think about the place where we were born. Zion is the place where God's presence was strongest. It's the place where they came together and worshiped. But Zion also represents for us the church and heaven.

<u>Then</u>	<u>Now</u>	<u>Future</u>
Zion, Jerusalem	Church, People of God	Heaven, New Jerusalem
Temple worship	Sanctuary worship	Throne worship

So, these worshipers are most grieved because their church, their worship is gone. For the Jews, worship was sacred. And Zion represents all of that: The presence of God, the people of God, and the worship of God.

There is a mindset today that says, “Ah church; if there’s nothing else going on this weekend, I’ll go. If I’ve caught up on my sleep and the grass doesn’t need mowing, I’ll try to make it. Worship’s nice, it make me feel good sometimes.” And worship becomes optional. But God says that worship is sacred. It is a divine appointment that He has set up for us to come to. Here’s how important worship is: God invites us to it and He always shows up for it!

So, the writer of the Psalm says in verse 2, ‘if we can’t worship where God set up for us to worship, we’ll hang up our instruments.’ Can you hear the sadness and despair in verse 4? “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”

And what’s even worse, they’re being tormented by the people who took them into exile, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” These Babylonians, the enemy, are gloating. Being a Steelers fan who had to live in Texas once, I know this feeling. In 1995, when the Cowboys beat the Steelers in the Super Bowl, my Cowboy friends gloated over me, “Sing us one of those Steelers fight songs now!” But I couldn’t, it’s hard to sing when you’re beaten.

#### *Worship is Pre-eminent*

So, these worshipers are sad, but they certainly haven’t lost any love for Jerusalem. In fact, look at how strongly he says he wants to love her in verses 5 and 6, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.” For this musician, worship is pre-eminent. He actually would rather have physical harm come to him than to hold anything higher than Jerusalem. This reminds us of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount when He says that it would be better for us to cut off a hand or pluck out an eye than to sin. It would be better for us to hurt ourselves than to find our highest joy in anything but God and His presence.

*Do you consider the church and its worship to be your highest joy?*

One of the fundamental convictions of the Bible is that the church is the primary instrument of God’s work in the world. And what a privilege to be a part of that work! Yes, the church is flawed and her people are not perfect by any stretch; nevertheless, God is using her to redeem the world.

You don’t have to be a pastor or missionary, etc... but I believe that God is calling every Christian to use his or her gifts to build up the church and become a part of His redemptive plan in the world. Jerusalem was a picture of that to a Jew in that culture; the local church is a picture of that today, although the bulk of a church’s ministry certainly happens outside of the four walls of the church building.

*Do you consider the church and its worship to be your highest joy?*

Jesus did; He never missed worship. I’m sure He had all the best excuses. Undoubtedly, He knew more than the local rabbi. Surely He grew tired of the people around Him going through the motions. But He considered it a joy and privilege to worship with His Body. In fact, He loved the church so much that He died for it!

Can you imagine if we all got a hold of this truth? There would be a line down the hall at every pastor's door asking him, pleading with him, to be able to do something in the church. He'd never have to ask for volunteers.

*Worship, for a Christian, is Joyful and Triumphant*

Now, the last part of the Psalm is the part that many of us don't like to read. It's not very pretty or very nice. The psalmist, in essence, is calling down a curse on his enemies. "Happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us, he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." This is brutal stuff! Are we supposed to think like this, much less pray like this? There are some who say that this shouldn't even be in the Bible, it's too mean, too violent, too unchristian. But it's in the Bible, so let's deal with it.

Now, on the one hand, this is a formulaic way of saying about your enemies, 'I hope your kingdom comes to an end, and if there are no children you won't have a generation to succeed you.' But, to whom is the Psalmist talking? Who is the "he" who repays the enemies of Israel and the church? It's God. The Psalmist isn't asking for some vigilante, just anybody, to come kill Babylonian children. He's asking God to actually do something that He promises He'll do: deliver justice. The universal law says, "He who sins will die." The book of Romans says, "The wages of sin is death."

This reminds us very much of Revelation 18, where John writes, "Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!" And he goes into great detail about how those who followed the ways of this world got what was coming to them. The Day of Judgment is coming. The day when all who stand against God and His church will be destroyed.

But, and here's the most beautiful part of the redemptive story: *God dashed His own Son against a rock! For you!* God loved you so much that He gave up His own Son to die in your place. And so, with the life and death and resurrection of Christ, we no longer have to rely on a temple system and finding God's presence in Jerusalem. It is everywhere for a Christian.

Our worship should be joyful and triumphant because Christ has paid our penalty and brought us out of the foreign land in which we once lived. When you come to Christ, you are not longer part of the city of Babylon, but you become a citizen of the city of God. There will be times when we are sad, like the Psalmist, because this world is fallen and because there are constant attempts made to "tear down Jerusalem" which for us is the church. But, God has raised up the church and He's said that the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

I challenge you to rethink your commitment to the church and its worship. And I encourage you to worship with joy because of Jesus' work on our behalf.