

HOW SHALL WE SING THE LORD'S SONG IN A FOREIGN LAND?

Psalm 137:4

Read Psalm 137:1-6. This psalm is one of the latter psalms. It was written while Judah was in Babylonian captivity (likely around the mid to early 500s BC). The inhabitants of Judah were carried away. Many of them had seen the city of Jerusalem utterly destroyed and the temple burned to the ground (2 Kings 25:8-12). Yet, while there in captivity, according to our text, some of their captors were asking them to sing some of their Jewish hymns for them. What the motives of their captors were is not cited (Were they genuinely curious? Seeking to be entertained? Or were they mocking Judeans? Etc.). But imagine being some 500+ miles away by straight line, but about 900 miles to get there, from Jerusalem. All your life, as a Jew, you knew the importance of the temple and the worship associated with it? How could anyone sing a song, especially a joyful hymn, as they thought about their place of worship completely gone? And then there was the realization that they would likely NEVER return or at best it would be a lifetime (about a half century) and even if they did return, TO WHAT? How sad that must have been. But it was the punishment of God because of their rebellion that they were there.

We are now living in unprecedented and distressing times. Because of an ongoing and stubborn virus, we are in the midst of a pandemic that has altered our lives. Because of government mandates AND for other more loving reasons we (loving one another and our neighbors – Matthew 22:39), the elders, have chosen to cancel all public assemblies. Clearly this decision was not made lightly. It was made with prayer and much discussion as to what is BEST in this “present distress”. This is NOT an ideal decision by any means, nor is it what we prefer, but we believe it is what is best and we are prayerful that God is accepting of these things.

With this in mind, I would like to spend a few moments talking about worship and assembling under these circumstances.

I. The “present distress”

- a. 1 Corinthians 7:26 – the context. As Paul is marriage and family during a trying time he uses the expression, “this present distress”. We are not told exactly what the problem was, but likely it involved Christians being persecuted. The word for *distress* is a troublesome circumstance that might involve hardship or strong pressure.

It is a context where Paul specifically mentions that His words are his judgment about the time (7:25 - not binding – it involved a man deciding whether or not to let his daughter get married, either way there was no sin in decision). He also notes at the conclusion of the chapter, “and I think I also have the Spirit of God” meaning he was confident his words were true.

The circumstances we are now dealing with are very likely different from the occasion Paul wrote about, but there are applications concerning making wise judgments in a time of “present distress”. We are dealing with EXCEPTIONAL times. In other words, these are times of exception I believe. The question is what to do.

- b. I am convinced this is an exceptional time where it is a correct decision to suspend our public assembling.

There is the dictates of the government forbidding all gatherings of which I will deal with this momentarily. ***But there is also a consideration of loving one another.*** Matthew 22:39 where Jesus described it as the second greatest commandment and one upon which all the law depended.

But consider also Romans 13:8-10. Notice in vs. 10, *Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love*

is the fulfillment of the law. Our neighbor was defined by Jesus as anyone whom we have opportunity to show mercy to in one way or another (Luke 10:29-37 – the parable of the good Samaritan). We are to consider the welfare of our neighbors, both our brethren and those outside of the body of Christ in the decisions we make. This distressing time is about spreading a dangerous and deadly disease.

- c. Circumstances in scripture where one could not worship – God understood there were circumstances that prevented certain individuals from assembling on designated occasions.
- i. **Leviticus 13 speaks of lepers** who were to separate themselves from the congregation because they were contagious. When first discovered, they were to isolate themselves until their condition was determined (Lev. 13:4, 5, 11, 21, 26, 31, 33). They were to REMAIN separated until their condition was resolved, including at least 7 days AFTER they were declared unclean.
Leviticus 13:45-46 – he was to indicate to the public he was unclean so that others would not come near and be contaminated.
 - ii. **One was defiled concerning the Passover.** Numbers 9:1-11, addressed how all Israel was to observe the Passover feast on the designated day (14th day of their first month). However, verse 6-11 records some men who defiled with a dead body and therefore they were unclean and thus unable to participate in the feast. Moses inquired of the LORD who made provisions – if one was defiled or on a journey a long way away, he could observe the Passover a month later (vs. 10-12).
 - iii. **Jesus addressing circumcision on the Sabbath.** John 7:22-23, Jesus in defending His healing on the Sabbath (doing good) noted how the Sabbath law and the law of circumcision could present a conflict. Obviously, Jesus noted that circumcision on the 8th day superseded the Sabbath rest. The point is extenuating circumstances lead to extenuating measures.
 - iv. **“But these are part of the Old Law”.** Yes they are, but they were written for our learning (Romans 15:4) and can give us insight into the character and expectations of God in similar circumstances.
 - v. **Paul in prison** – Paul spent considerable time in prison, being transported, and possibly in other circumstances where he might have been prohibited from assembling with brethren on the first day of the week. I am convinced in such circumstances he was not sinning because these were circumstances beyond his control.
 - vi. **What about today?** Clearly when one is sick, has to care for someone in their family (1 Timothy 5:8), and various other unavoidable reasons, we realize they cannot assemble and are not sinning as a result of that.
There are also times where physical safety is a concern – such as a natural disaster (ice, hurricanes, earthquakes, etc.) or civil matters (such as rioting in a neighborhood) that might cause us to alter our plans to assemble together TEMPORARILY.
- d. **The KEY to this is that this is TEMPORARY** - exactly how long it will take is unknown, but this will pass and we will be permitted to resume our regular schedule of assembling. Contrast that with first century Christians who faced persecutions and often profession of their faith was illegal. Consider Paul in Philippians 1:19, 24-25 – he was a prisoner (likely in Rome) but looked forward to being released so that he could continue with them.
Let us pray that this distress will be over sooner rather than later and that our motives are proper (not a willful forsaking your brethren).

- e. **What about Hebrews 10:25?** Are we forsaking the assembling ourselves together?
 The word “forsake” means to abandon or to leave. The context was dealing with brethren who CHOSE to leave their brethren because they didn’t want to face persecutions, or they doctrinally abandoned them. Hence the warning of Hebrews 10:26-31.
 Again this is temporary situation that is based on our health (the truth is we don’t know if we have this contagious virus or if someone else has it because of the way it works). Furthermore, there is the tendency to endanger others who are in the most vulnerable categories (which is MOST of our congregation).
 This time is not about willfully choosing to pursue worldly pleasures, or being indifferent toward our need to assemble. We are VERY MUCH aware of what we are to do, and we would be with our brethren if we could.
- f. **What about Acts 5:29?** Some have vowed to meet in spite of it being prohibited by governing authorities. They might site this passage. That is a decision they must make and be willing to face whatever consequences are involved. But is our present distress really the intent of Peter’s statement. They were being threatened to quit preaching Jesus.
 That is NOT what we are dealing with today.
 We may question the motives of our government in this circumstance, but it is not designed to forbid us from worshipping God or even seeking to teach others about Jesus. This is a HEALTH concern. And also, a concern as we strive to let our lights shine within our community.
 Consider and read Romans 13:1-5. First recall the background – this is written during a time when governments were hostile against Christ and His church. Christians were being persecuted. Yet Paul said to be subject to governing authorities as they are appointed by God.
To resist this authority is to resist God and bring judgment upon ourselves (we NEED to think about this as we make decisions that conflict with the laws of the land).
 Vs. 3, Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Is the attempt to stop the spread of this virus a good work?
 Vs. 4, For he is God’s minister for good!
 Vs. 5, Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience’ sake.
 We need to weigh this context as we consider the government’s directives.

II. I still need to worship God

- a. Having said all this, this not an excuse to stop worshipping God all together. I want to encourage each of you to keep worshipping God, setting aside the time we would normally be together and spend it worshipping God in your homes and with loved ones as possible.
- b. **In the Bible there is both public and private worship.** Clearly there is the coming together to worship God (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 11:23ff, 16:1-2, Colossians 3:16, 1 Corinthians 14, etc.), but there is also our personal worship – Bible study and prayer, and even singing songs together (Acts 16:25 – Paul and Silas in prison in Philippi, James 5:13, etc.).
 We can STILL worship God privately and as a family.
- c. **What about the Lord’s Supper?** In my studies, I am fully convinced the Lord’s Supper is intended as an act of fellowship with Christ and one another ONLY when we assemble together. Acts 20:7 gives us that example. 1 Corinthians 11 also addresses this – Vs. 20, he rebuked them because what they were doing was NOT the Lord’s Supper, but it was something intended to do “when you come together”. After Paul properly describes the purpose and establishment of the Lord’s Supper, he

warns them about partaking in an unworthy manner (vs. 27-29). This is in a context that is dealing with PROCEDURE as well as attitude as we partake. In vs. 33-34, after addressing abuses he says, *“Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat (context – the Lord’s Supper – TT), WAIT for one another. But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come.”* (Emphasis mine- TT).

- d. **What can we do?** As already noted, we can sing songs together, we can read God’s word, say prayers. We can listen to sermons and Bible studies (like this one). AND, let me encourage you to take a few moments to think about the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, as we do when we partake of the Lord’s supper. Just’ because we cannot partake of the emblems doesn’t mean we cannot remind ourselves of why He came and offer prayers related to that in our private worship. If you need help locating resources, please let me know and I will help you with what you desire. NOTE: We are working on ways within the next few days to provide online resources during this time.
- e. **The point is:** I cannot emphasize enough - KEEP worshipping God as you are able. I am convinced that even though the Jews were unable to observe the annual feasts and Sabbath worship in Jerusalem, the godly still sought to worship God in whatever way they could while away from the temple worship.

III. Final thoughts

- a. **Let us use this time to APPRECIATE our ability to assemble as often as we can.** Again, I appeal to the Jews in captivity in Babylon. It has been said that many do not appreciate their blessings until they are taken away. We live in a time when many take for granted their freedom to worship God. They are flippant about assembling and will let anything keep them away, OR they are flippant WHILE assembling. We have emphasized the importance of a proper attitude when we assemble. We worship God both in spirit and in truth (John 4:24). Perhaps this present distress will give us a greater appreciation for assembling when we are able to resume. As David said in Psalm 122:1, *I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go into the house of the Lord.”* AND Psalm 84:1-4, *How lovely is Your tabernacle, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yes, even faints For the courts of the Lord; My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God. Even the sparrow has found a home, And the swallow a nest for herself, Where she may lay her young— Even Your altars, O Lord of hosts, My King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in Your house; They will still be praising You. Selah ... 84:9-12, O God, behold our shield, And look upon the face of Your anointed. For a day in Your courts is better than a thousand. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God Than dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the Lord God is a sun and shield; The Lord will give grace and glory; No good thing will He withhold From those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, Blessed is the man who trusts in You!*
- b. **Let us use this time to let our lights shine** – be a good example – be a good neighbor. Romans 15:2 tells us, *“Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.”* In these times we are seeing all sorts of bad behavior (and good behavior in others). Don’t get caught up in the bad behavior, ESPECIALLY on social media – watch what you write and share. Matthew 5:16, let your light so shine...
- c. **Don’t forget to encourage one another and check on our elderly who are “shut in”.** Remember James 1:27, *“Pure and undefiled religion is this...”*

This is a particularly difficult time for them for a number of reasons. Reach out to one another to encourage and see what we can do for them. Then get it done to the best of your ability. “Visit” doesn’t just mean go and say “Hi”. In fact, that may not be possible right now.

One thought I came across in various discussions online in recent days – Concerning shut-ins, in these times we have a TEMPORARY taste of what some deal with on an ongoing basis. May this increase our compassion and concerns, even when this present distress is over.

- d. ***Don’t get caught up with too much news*** – Philippians 4:4 tells us to rejoice in the Lord always. As we have noted, this doesn’t necessarily mean to always be happy, but it does deal with that disposition that is pleasant. There are some circumstances you cannot control, but there are others you can. CHOOSE to be upbeat. And that means find something better to do than listening to all the bad news. if you spend all day listening to the news and following this virus on social media and the internet, it will rob you of your joy. Instead of seeing the darkness, make the best of your situation and look toward the light at the end of the tunnel. We will get there eventually.

Truly these are distressing and unprecedented times in our lives. But it is likely not the end of the world. Let us resolve that we are going to make the best of our circumstances and let this present distress draw us closer to Him. We can do that with a proper attitude and by continuing to worship Him, even though we are separated from one another. Hang in there, as this too will pass. Think about it. The lesson is yours. May God bless you in your efforts to serve Him, until we meet again.

Let us pray!