

GOD'S SILENT ORCHESTRA

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof (Ps. 137:1-2)

The Psalms are among the most popular and widely read parts of the Old Testament. Most of them were written by David, whose words relate to the experiences of millions of people. Readers may not know that a few of the songs were composed by other authors and were accepted by the scholars to whom God entrusted the responsibility of compiling the Holy Scriptures. Psalm 137 is an outstanding example of that fact. It was written by someone who evidently sat alongside the rivers in Babylon, placed his harp in the willow trees, and shared the remorse that broke the hearts of the Hebrew captives. It is not known whether he wrote his lines in Babylon or after he returned to his homeland, but the word picture gained an abiding place in the sacred records of Israel.

The Babylonian people were famous for agriculture. Although they lived in a desert they created canals through which the water of the Euphrates River flowed in all directions. Probably many of the Hebrews were responsible for the maintenance of those waterways. It is not difficult to imagine the slaves sitting outside their hovels after a long day's work, even the stars in the heavens appeared to mock the people whose eyes were filled with tears. Far back across the years, Hebrews had been warned by their prophets and entreated by Jehovah but had refused to cooperate, and their land had been devastated. Their outlook was forbidding; the sands of the desert were an impassable barrier between their hovels and freedom.

The Disturbing Reflection ... Saddening

"We wept when we remembered Zion." There was plenty of refreshment in the rivers of Babylon, but unfortunately, there was no

living water! It was easy to meet the need of the households, but the wells of salvation were beyond reach. It is interesting that the slaves still possessed harps. When the invaders overran Jerusalem, homes were burned and possessions were either destroyed or stolen. Yet the captives retained their musical instruments. On the other hand, perhaps when they arrived in Babylon they made new harps to replace what had been lost. They could exist without homes, belongings, and even hope, but could not live without music! Their sonnets, although mournful, spoke of their homeland.

There was plenty of shade beneath the willow, poplar, tamarisk, and acacia trees, but it was impossible to find a hiding place from the oppressive heat of a guilty conscience. The memories of Zion filled their eyes with tears. Babylon did not possess a spiritual sanctuary; there were no inspiring festivals, and the voice of the prophet was never heard. The older people remembered those hallowed moments, but when the younger folk who had been born in captivity heard their testimonies, it was difficult to believe what was spoken. Jehovah apparently had forgotten His people.

The slaves wept because their past was irretrievable, the present depressing, and hope for future deliverance an illusion. Tears were evidence of broken hearts. Yet even amid the gloom of their darkest night, a bright star was appearing. It was better to remember and weep, than to forget and become callous. Hope cannot die when memory remains active. I shall always remember the words of a man who had been a busy

GOD'S SILENT ORCHESTRA

Christian worker but for various reasons had become an alcoholic and a derelict. He appeared to be beyond the reach of God's love, but an amazing miracle was performed when he returned to the fellowship of the church. It was thought provoking when he confessed that even in his most regrettable moments, God continued to speak to him; when he was alone, he wept. The whispers of God could not be silenced. Fanny Crosby was correct when she wrote,

Down in the human heart
Crushed by the tempter,
Feelings lie buried
That Grace can restore.
Touched by a loving hand,
Wakened by kindness,
Chords that were broken
Can vibrate once more.

74

The Denied Request... Surprising

`for there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" (Ps. 137:3-4). An old Indian said that no man should criticize a neighbor until he has walked in his brother's moccasins! Maria Callocot tells an interesting story from British history. She writes,

It is a curious fact that when Cromwell, like a wise politician, allowed the Jews to settle in London and to have synagogues, they came hither in sufficient numbers to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles in booths among the willows on the borders of the river Thames. The disturbance of their comfort from the innumerable spectators, chiefly London apprentices, called for some protection from the local magistrates. Not that any insult was offered to their persons, but a natural curiosity, excited by so new and extraordinary spectacle, induced many to press too closely round their camp and perhaps intrude upon their privacy. (Spurgeon on the Psalms [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978], 628)

A well known commentator believes the Hebrews lost a glorious opportunity to spread their faith among the heathen. He writes, "They should have ceased pouting and complaining and used their music to evangelize their oppressors." It is difficult to accept that conclusion for broken hearts and crushed spirits do not sing. It is easy to write words of condemnation when seated in a comfortable office, but the writer of the denunciation probably never had a back lacerated by the whips of enemies.

Archeological data now preserved in museums reveals the terrible atrocities perpetrated by some of the ancient nations. Yet the people who asked the Hebrews to sing might have been curious observers who desired to hear some of Israel's melodies. The Babylonians possessed musical instruments such as "the comet, flute, harp, sackbut, psaltery, and dulcimer, and all kinds of musick" (Dan. 3:15), but they had no melodies to be compared with the songs of the Hebrews. David's harp and songs dispelled the anger of Saul, soothed his troubled spirit, and restored peace to his mind. The plaintive cords of the captives' songs expressed the language of the soul and were indicative of the hunger within the hearts of the people from Canaan.

When the Hebrews quietly but firmly refused to entertain their captors,

75

they indicated that people out of touch with God cannot reproduce

GOD'S SILENT ORCHESTRA

heaven's music. The poet expressed this truth when he wrote,

The peaceful hours, I once enjoyed:
How sweet the memory still;
But they have left an aching void,
The world can never fill.

People who have climbed the hills of Canaan could never be satisfied sitting by the rivers of Babylon.

The Definite Resolve ... Sustaining

"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy" (Ps. 137:5-6). Men and women whose lives have been ruined often contemplate committing suicide, but terminating one's life would be a greater tragedy. The Hebrews in Babylon might have died in despair, but instead they transformed their mistakes into stepping stones by which they climbed out of their degradation. Surrounded by idols and the possibility of compromising, the people determined never to forget Jerusalem. If it were impossible to return to their homeland, they would die thinking about it. Among the captives was a man named Daniel, whose faith shone as a beacon. Daily he opened his windows toward Jerusalem and interceded for his nation. People saw him kneeling to pray and recognized an immortal faith. The Babylonians heard of the incident when lions refused to harm a saint, and never forgot how three young men were thrown into a furnace to discover the presence of "One like unto the Son of God."

No man is too sinful to pray, no burden too heavy to place at God's feet. The Lord who saw and understood the plight of the slaves in Babylon is able to help captives in every city in the world. He can do the impossible, but He likes to be asked!

The Delightful Reawakening Stimulating

"When the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion, we were like them that dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing: then said they among the heathen, The Lord hath done great things for them" (Ps. 126:1-2). It is worthy of attention that the father of the prodigal interrupted the prepared speech of his son

76

who had planned to say, "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, And am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants." The returning man never had a chance to complete his statement for the delighted parent interrupted before the final request could be made (see Luke 15:18-22). The homecoming reception exceeded anything imaginable, and during the proceedings the prodigal was surely astounded. He and the captives in Babylon had much in common.

The prodigal remembered eating with pigs, the shame of associating with deplorable women, and the unmentionable things that would haunt him forever. Nevertheless the joy expressed in his welcome party, the warmth of his father's embrace, and the comfort of his home reminded him of the folly that took him to the far country. That his father's forgiveness could obliterate the past seemed to be incomprehensible. He deserved condemnation, but when the best robe was placed around his shoulders, gratitude filled his eyes with tears.

Many years ago a man took to drinking, and fell so low that his family disowned him, and even his wife cast him off. One night, hungry, penniless and footsore, he stumbled into the Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago. Someone was singing: "There's a wide-ness in God's mercy," and, as he tells it now: "It just broke me all

GOD'S SILENT ORCHESTRA

up." When the meeting was over, he wandered out to the home where his wife lived with her father. He threw himself down in the backyard, hoping that when morning dawned he might get a glimpse of his little boy whom he was no longer permitted to visit. As the Eastern sky began to blush, and the old song kept ringing in his ears, he says now: "Instead of creeping up to the window, I just crept up to the feet of Jesus, and He didn't scold me—He knew I had been scolded enough—and He didn't pity me, and He didn't give me any advice either. He knew I had had plenty of that. He just put His arms around my neck and loved me. And when the sun arose I was a new man." (quoted from The Brooklyn Eagle)

The stories of the captives and the prodigal returning to their homes suggest five propositions: (1) No person is safe if he or she plays with sin; (2) No person is beyond the reach of God's love; (3) No sin is too great for a heavenly Father to forgive; (4) Reconciliation is impossible until a sinner requests pardon; (5) No language can effectively express the happiness of a soul when forgiveness becomes a reality.

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