



WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE AN OUTSIDER

There will come a point, for every Christian, when you feel like you don't belong, like the world is going one way and you're going the other. It might be a family gathering, it might be hanging out with friends, it might be in the workplace, or school or uni. Anywhere where you realise that the world has a very different view of things to you. How are we to live in a way that is faithful to God? How can we sing when we feel like an outsider?

That's the theme of today's psalm, as well as a No1 hit for a certain 70s disco band.

Cue those dance moves!

Psalm 137

Most psalms end on a major, but there are some that go for a minor instead. E.g.: Psalm 39:13 ("God, please leave me alone"), or Psalm 88:18 ("My only friend is darkness"). But for sheer graphic brutality, nothing beats the end of this one. No wonder Boney M stopped at vs4!

So, what do we do with a psalm like this? And what does it say about being an outsider?

Context first: the psalm was written by an Israelite who'd been taken into exile to Babylon – which is why you find him sitting by the Tigris or Euphrates, balling his eyes out (in fact, in Hebrew the suffix *nu*, 'we' or 'us', is repeated throughout vs1-3, to make the writer sound like he's crying). To

make matters worse, his captors are having a laugh at his expense. Specifically, at the expense of his faith.

Like the Jews sent to Babylon, we are a people in exile. What do I mean by that? The human race has been exiled from Eden, and some of us at least want to return. But we are also living 'between times': between the first and second comings of Jesus. So, we've had a glimpse of the kingdom of God, and we know we're going to see it again. But in the meantime, we're living here, in Babylon.

So that's the background: how then do we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? How do we honour and glorify God in a world that, on the whole, dances to a different tune; a different rhythm?

There are 3 principles here:

1) Sing A Song Of Defiance (vs1-3). The Babylonians are requesting a worship song – rubbing salt into the wound – and the Jews respond by hanging up their harps. I.e. we're not going to sing just coz you tell us to.

Now this is not a call to be obnoxious or unloving: remember, the people you share this world with are people that Jesus loves and died for. And some of them may be searching, too - so, don't scupper it by treating them like an enemy! Even so, the Christian life is a song of defiance – because in order to be the salt and light we're called to be (Matthew 5), you have to be willing to be different. To stand your ground. And sometimes, to say "No." We're all on a collision course with the world, because the world is on a collision course with God. Because the king of this world – Satan – has misled and blinded people. However, the good news is that God can use you to open people's eyes. But in order to do that, you have to be different. You have to be a rebel with a cause!

As I've said to many a youth-group over the years, "The most rebellious thing you can ever do is become a Christian." Because if you do what the world expects of you, you're just doing what everyone else does.

2) Sing A Song Of Delight (vs4-6). In a world that doesn't really love God, it can be easy for your own love to wear a bit thin, or to grow a bit cold – for other joys to become more important. Because the world can have a corrosive effect on a person's faith. And some of you, you know what I'm talking about. Because it's happened to you.

Which is why the psalmist says, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill and my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth." It's a bit like a couple who have been together a while, and the passion is maybe not as strong as it once was. How do you fan those flames back into life? Revelation 2 puts it like this: "Go and do the things you did at first." In terms of your faith, what is it that breathes life into you? Is it prayer? Worship? Reading the Bible? Hanging around with other Christians? Then do it! And if you're making excuses, don't. Jesus doesn't call you to make excuses, He calls you to make a difference. And you're only going to do that if your relationship with Jesus is what it should be.

In a way, we have to live as though we're still back in Eden. Or back in Jerusalem. Or as though the Kingdom of God is here, now. Because in a way, it is. In *you*.

3) Sing A Song Of Deliverance (vs7-9). How are we meant to interpret this? Is it encouraging us to seek vengeance on our enemies, or to forget all that stuff about praying for them, as Jesus taught us to (Luke 23)? No, I don't think so.

- Firstly, understand that just because someone prays something, doesn't mean that God agrees, or is going to say 'yes' to it. But sometimes we have to vent our anger and sorrow, like the psalmist.
- Secondly, don't go taking the wording literally. Remember, this is a poem, not a historical narrative (and even historical narrative has to be read with Hebrew sayings and turns-of-phrase in mind).
- Thirdly, remember that 'children' carries a wide range of meanings, from literal sons and daughters or descendants to those who have inherited the spirit and values and destiny of a person or a place.

In this instance, I think the psalmist is talking about the citizens of Babylon. But he's also reminding himself, and us, that this world is not going to continue like this indefinitely. God's kingdom is coming! We will return to Eden!

Because ultimately, God's side is the *winning* side.

Go Against The Flow

So, if you find yourself feeling like you don't quite belong in this world, good! You don't! In fact, the bigger concern is when you do! When there is no friction, no conflict, no 'clash of cultures.' That's what Jeremiah 51:45 means when it says, "Come out of her, My people", as in come out of Babylon. It means don't get too chummy with this world, coz it ain't gonna last! The Kingdom is coming!

Now it might be at this moment that you feel like you're locking horns with the world. And you may be up for that fight; then again, you may feel like giving up, giving in, going with the flow. If you look at those books that date from the exile – Daniel, Esther, Nehemiah – the people God used were those who stayed faithful, to Him. And the call of this psalm – of the Bible – is to do the same. So, stay faithful!

And know that God can use *you*, too.