

PSALM CXXXVII.

This plaintive ode is one of the most charming compositions in the whole Book of Psalms for its poetic power. If it were not inspired it would nevertheless occupy a high place in poesy, especially the former portion of it, which is tender and patriotic to the highest degree. In the later verses (7, 8, 9), we have utterances of burning indignation against the chief adversaries of Israel,—an indignation as righteous as it was fervent. Let those find fault with it who have never seen their temple burned, their city ruined, their wives ravished, and their children slain; they might not, perhaps, be quite so velvet-mouthed if they had suffered after this fashion. It is one thing to talk of the bitter feeling which moved captive Israelites in Babylon, and quite another thing to be captives ourselves under a savage and remorseless power, which knew not how to show mercy, but delighted in barbarities to the defenceless. The song is such as might fitly be sung in the Jews' wailing-place. It is a fruit of the Captivity in Babylon, and often has it furnished expression for sorrows which else had been unutterable. It is an opalesque Psalm within whose mild radiance there glows a fire which strikes the beholder with wonder.

EXPOSITION.

BY the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

2 We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.

3 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*.

4 How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?

5 If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget *her cunning*.

6 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.

1. "*By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down.*" Water-courses were abundant in Babylon, wherein were not only natural streams but artificial canals: it was a place of broad rivers and streams. Glad to be away from the noisy streets, the captives sought the river side, where the flow of the waters seemed to be in sympathy with their tears. It was some slight comfort to be out of the crowd, and to have a little breathing room, and therefore they sat down, as if to rest a while and solace themselves in their sorrow. In little groups they sat down and made common lamentation, mingling their memories and their tears. The rivers were well enough, but, alas, they were the rivers of Babylon, and the ground whereon the sons of Israel sat was foreign soil, and therefore they wept. Those who came to interrupt their quiet were citizens of the destroying city, and their company was not desired. Everything reminded Israel of her banishment from the holy city, her servitude beneath the shadow of the temple of Bel, her helplessness under a cruel enemy; and therefore her sons and daughters sat down in sorrow.

"*Yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.*" Nothing else could have subdued their brave spirits; but the remembrance of the temple of their God, the palace of their king, and the centre of their national life, quite broke them down. Destruction had swept down all their delights, and therefore they wept—the strong men wept, the sweet singers wept! They did not weep when they remembered the cruelties of Babylon; the memory of fierce oppression dried their tears and made their hearts burn with wrath: but when the beloved city of their solemnities came into their minds they could not refrain from floods of tears. Even thus do true believers mourn when they see the church despoiled, and find themselves unable to succour her: we could bear anything better than this. In these our times the

Babylon of error ravages the city of God, and the hearts of the faithful are grievously wounded as they see truth fallen in the streets, and unbelief rampant among the professed servants of the Lord. We bear our protests, but they appear to be in vain; the multitude are mad upon their idols. Be it ours to weep in secret for the hurt of our Zion: it is the least thing we can do; perhaps in its result it may prove to be the best thing we can do. Be it ours also to sit down and deeply consider what is to be done. Be it ours, in any case, to keep upon our mind and heart the memory of the church of God which is so dear to us. The frivolous may forget, but Zion is graven on our hearts, and her prosperity is our chief desire.

2. "*We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.*" The drooping branches appeared to weep as we did, and so we gave to them our instruments of music; the willows could as well make melody as we, for we had no mind for minstrelsy. In the midst of the willows, or in the midst of the rivers, or in the midst of Babylon, it matters little which, they hung their harps aloft—those harps which once in Zion's halls the soul of music shed. Better to hang them up than to dash them down: better to hang them on willows than profane them to the service of idols. Sad indeed is the child of sorrow when he grows weary of his harp, from which in better days he had been able to draw sweet solaces. Music hath charms to give unquiet spirits rest; but when the heart is sorely sad it only mocks the grief which flies to it. Men put away their instruments of mirth when a heavy cloud darkens their souls.

3. "*For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song.*" It was ill to be a singer at all when it was demanded that this talent should go into bondage to an oppressor's will. Better be dumb than be forced to please an enemy with forced song. What cruelty to make a people sigh, and then require them to sing! Shall men be carried away from home and all that is dear to them, and yet chant merrily for the pleasure of their unfeeling captors? This is studied torture: the iron enters into the soul. It is indeed "woe to the conquered" when they are forced to sing to increase the triumph of their conquerors. Cruelty herein reached a refinement seldom thought of. We do not wonder that the captives sat them down to weep when thus insulted. "*And they that wasted us required of us mirth.*" The captives must not only sing but smile, and add merriment to their music. Blind Samson in former days must be brought forth to make sport for Philistines, and now the Babylonians prove themselves to be loaves of the same leaven. Plundered, wounded, fettered, carried into captivity and poverty, yet must the people laugh as if it were all a play, and they must sport as if they felt no sorrow. This was wormwood and gall to the true lovers of God and his chosen land. "*Saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.*" Nothing would serve their turn but a holy hymn, and a tune sacred to the worship of Jehovah. Nothing will content the Babylonian mockers but one of Israel's Psalms when in her happiest days she sang unto the Lord whose mercy endureth for ever: this would make rare fun for their persecutors, who would deride their worship and ridicule their faith in Jehovah. In this demand there was an insult to their God, as well as a mockery of themselves, and this made it the more intensely cruel. Nothing could have been more malicious, nothing more productive of grief. These wanton persecutors had followed the captives into their retirement, and had remarked upon their sorrowful appearance, and "there" and then they bade the mourners make mirth for them. Could they not let the sufferers alone? Were the exiles to have no rest? The daughter of Babylon seemed determined to fill up her cup of iniquity, by torturing the Lord's people. Those who had been the most active agents of Israel's undoing must needs follow up their ferocities by mockeries. "The tender mercies of the wicked are cruel." Worse than the Egyptians, they asked not labour which their victims could have rendered, but they demanded mirth which they could not give, and holy songs which they dared not profane to such a purpose.

4. "*How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?*" How shall they sing at all? sing in a strange land? sing Jehovah's song among the uncircumcised? No, that must not be; it shall not be. With one voice they refuse, but the refusal is humbly worded by being put in the form of a question. If the men of Babylon were wicked enough to suggest the defiling of holy things for the gratification of curiosity, or for the creation of amusement, the men of Zion had not so hardened their hearts as to be willing to please them at such a fearful cost. There are many things which the ungodly could do, and think nothing of the doing thereof, which gracious men cannot venture upon. The question "How can I?" or "How shall

we ? ” comes of a tender conscience and denotes an inability to sin which is greatly to be cultivated.

5. “*If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.*” To sing Zion’s songs for the pleasure of Zion’s foes, would be to forget the Holy City. Each Jew declares for himself that he will not do this ; for the pronoun alters from “ we ” to “ I.” Individually the captives pledge themselves to fidelity to Jerusalem, and each one asserts that he had sooner forget the art which drew music from his harp-strings than use it for Babel’s delectation. Better far that the right hand should forget its usual handieraft, and lose all its dexterity, than that it should fetch music for rebels out of the Lord’s instruments, or accompany with sweet skill a holy Psalm desecrated into a common song for fools to laugh at. Not one of them will thus dishonour Jehovah to glorify Belus and gratify his votaries. Solemnly they imprecate vengeance upon themselves should they so false, so faithless prove.

6. “*If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth.*” Thus the singers imprecate eternal silence upon their mouths if they forget Jerusalem to gratify Babylon. The players on instruments and the sweet songsters are of one mind : the enemies of the Lord will get no mirthful tune or song from them. “*If I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.*” The sacred city must ever be first in their thoughts, the queen of their souls ; they had sooner be dumb than dishonour her sacred hymns, and give occasion to the oppressor to ridicule her worship. If such the attachment of a banished Jew to his native land, how much more should we love the church of God of which we are children and citizens. How jealous should we be of her honour, how zealous for her prosperity. Never let us find jests in the words of Scripture, or make amusement out of holy things, lest we be guilty of forgetting the Lord and his cause. It is to be feared that many tongues have lost all power to charm the congregations of the saints because they have forgotten the gospel, and God has forgotten *them*.

7 Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem ; who said, *Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.*

8 O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed ; happy *shall he be*, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.

9 Happy *shall he be*, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

7. “*Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem.*” The case is left in Jehovah’s hands. He is a God of recompenses, and will deal out justice with impartiality. The Edomites ought to have been friendly with the Israelites, from kinship ; but there was a deep hatred and cruel spite displayed by them. The elder loved not to serve the younger, and so when Jacob’s day of tribulation came, Esau was ready to take advantage of it. The captive Israelites being moved by grief to lodge their complaints with God, also added a prayer for his visitation of the nation which meanly sided with their enemies, and even urged the invaders to more than their usual cruelty. “*Who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.*” They wished to see the last of Jerusalem and the Jewish state ; they would have no stone left standing, they desired to see a clean sweep of temple, palace, wall, and habitation. It is horrible for neighbours to be enemies, worse for them to show their enmity in times of great affliction, worst of all for neighbours to egg others on to malicious deeds. Those are responsible for other men’s sins who would use them as the tools of their own enmity. It is a shame for men to incite the wicked to deeds which they are not able to perform themselves. The Chaldeans were ferocious enough without being excited to greater fury ; but Edom’s hate was insatiable. Those deserve to be remembered by vengeance who in evil times do not remember mercy ; how much more those who take advantage of calamities to wreak revenge upon sufferers. When Jerusalem’s day of restoration comes Edom will be remembered and wiped out of existence.

8. “*O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed.*” Or the destroyer, let us accept the word either way, or both ways : the destroyer would be destroyed, and the Psalmist in vision saw her as already destroyed. It is usual to speak of a city as a virgin daughter. Babylon was in her prime and beauty, but she was already doomed for her crimes. “*Happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.*” The avenger would be fulfilling an honourable calling in overthrowing a power so brutal, so inhuman. Assyrian and Chaldean armies had been boastfully

brutal in their conquests ; it was meet that their conduct should be measured back into their own bosoms. No awards of punishment can be more unanswerably just than those which closely follow the *lex talionis*, even to the letter. Babylon must fall, as she caused Jerusalem to fall ; and her sack and slaughter must be such as she appointed for other cities. The patriot-poet sitting sorrowfully in his exile, finds a solace in the prospect of the overthrow of the empress city which holds him in bondage, and he accounts Cyrus right happy to be ordained to such a righteous work. The whole earth would bless the conqueror for ridding the nations of a tyrant ; future generations would call him blessed for enabling men to breathe again, and for once more making liberty possible upon the earth.

We may rest assured that every unrighteous power is doomed to destruction, and that from the throne of God justice will be measured out to all whose law is force, whose rule is selfishness, and whose policy is oppression. Happy is the man who shall help in the overthrow of the spiritual Babylon, which, despite its riches and power, is "to be destroyed." Happier still shall he be who shall see it sink like a millstone in the flood, never to rise again. What that spiritual Babylon is none need enquire. There is but one city upon earth which can answer to the name.

9. "*Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.*" Fierce was the heart of the Jew who had seen his beloved city the scene of such terrific butchery. His heart pronounced like sentence upon Babylon. She should be scourged with her own whip of wire. The desire for righteous retribution is rather the spirit of the law than of the gospel ; and yet in moments of righteous wrath the old fire will burn ; and while justice survives in the human breast it will not lack for fuel among the various tyrannies which still survive. We shall be wise to view this passage as a prophecy. History informs us that it was literally fulfilled : the Babylonian people in their terror agreed to destroy their own offspring, and men thought themselves happy when they had put their own wives and children to the sword. Horrible as was the whole transaction, it is a thing to be glad of if we take a broad view of the world's welfare ; for Babylon, the gigantic robber, had for many a year slaughtered nations without mercy, and her fall was the rising of many people to a freer and safer state. The murder of innocent infants can never be sufficiently deplored, but it was an incident of ancient warfare which the Babylonians had not omitted in their massacres, and, therefore, they were not spared it themselves. The revenges of providence may be slow, but they are ever sure ; neither can they be received with regret by those who see God's righteous hand in them. It is a wretched thing that a nation should need an executioner ; but yet if men will commit murder tears are more fitly shed over their victims than over the assassins themselves. A feeling of universal love is admirable, but it must not be divorced from a keen sense of justice.

The captives in Babylon did not make music, but they poured forth their righteous maledictions, and these were far more in harmony with their surroundings than songs and laughter could have been. Those who mock the Lord's people will receive more than they desire, to their own confusion : they shall have little enough to make mirth for them, and more than enough to fill them with misery. The execrations of good men are terrible things, for they are not lightly uttered, and they are heard in heaven. "The curse causeless shall not come ;" but is there not a cause ? Shall despots crush virtue beneath their iron heel and never be punished ? Time will show.

EXPLANATORY NOTES AND QUAIN T SAYINGS.

Whole Psalm.—Observe that this very Psalm in which the question is asked, "How can we sing ?" is itself a song, one of the Lord's songs, still. Nothing can be more sad, more desponding. It speaks of weeping in the remembrance of Zion ; it speaks of harps hung upon the willows by exiles who have no heart to use them ; and yet the very telling of these sorrows, of this incapacity for song, is a song still.

We chant it in our congregations now, hundreds and thousands of years after its composition, as one of the Church's melodies, as one of the Lord's songs. It gives us a striking example of the variety, of the versatility of worship, even in that department which might seem to be all joyous, all praise. The very refusal to sing may be itself a song. Any real utterance of good thoughts, whether they be thoughts of gladness or thoughts of sorrow, may be a true hymn, a true melody for the congregation, even though it may not breathe at every moment the very thought of all the worshippers. "How shall we sing?" is itself a permanent hymn, an inspired song, for all the churches.—*C. J. Vaughan.*

Whole Psalm.—This Psalm is composed of two parts. The first is, an heavy complaint of the church, unto verse 7. The other is an heavy imprecation and a prophetic denunciation against the enemies of the church, unto the end of the Psalm.—*Robert Rollock.*

Whole Psalm.—What a wonderful mixture is the Psalm of soft melancholy and fiery patriotism! The hand which wrote it must have known how to smite sharply with the sword, as well as how to tune the harp. The words are burning words of a heart breathing undying love to his country, undying hate to his foe. The poet is indeed

"Dower'd with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn,
The love of love."

J. J. Stewart Perowne.

Whole Psalm.—Several of the Psalms obviously refer to the time of the Babylonian captivity . . . The captives' mournful sentiments of pensive melancholy and weary longing during its long and weary continuance constitute the burden of the hundred and thirty-seventh. It was probably written by some gifted captive Levite at the time. Some suppose it to have been composed by Jeremiah, the prophet of tears, and sent to his countrymen in the land of their exile, in order to awaken fond memories of the past and sustain a lively hope for the future; and certainly the ode is worthy even of his pen, for it is one of the sweetest, most plaintive, and exquisitely beautiful elegies in any language. It is full of heart-melting, tear-bringing pathos. The moaning of the captive, the wailing of the exile, and the sighing of the saints are heard in every line.—*W. Ormiston, in "The Study," 1874.*

Whole Psalm.—Here, I. The melancholy captives cannot enjoy themselves, verses 1, 2. II. They cannot humour their proud oppressors, verses 3, 4. III. They cannot forget Jerusalem, verses 5, 6. IV. They cannot forget Edom and Babylon, verses 7, 8, 9.—*Matthew Henry.*

Verse 1.—"By the rivers of Babylon." The canals of Babylon itself, probably (comp. verse 2).—*William Kay.*

Verse 1.—"By the rivers." Euphrates, Tigris, Chaboras, etc., and the canals which intersected the country. The exiles would naturally resort to the banks of the streams as shady, cool and retired spots, where they could indulge in their sorrowful remembrances. The prophets of the exile saw their visions by the river. Ezek. i. 1; Dan. viii. 2; x. 4.—*"Bibliotheca Sacra and Theological Review," 1848.*

Verse 1.—"By the rivers." The bank of a river, like the seashore, is a favourite place of sojourn of those whom deep grief drives forth from the bustle of men into solitude. The boundary line of the river gives to solitude a safe back; the monotonous splashing of the waves keeps up the dull, melancholy alternation of thoughts and feelings; and at the same time the sight of the cool, fresh water exercises a soothing influence upon the consuming fever within the heart.—*Franz Delitzsch.*

Verse 1.—"By the rivers." The peculiar reason for the children of Israel being represented as sitting at the streams is the *weeping*. An internal reference of the weeping to the streams, must therefore have been what gave rise to the representation of the sitting. Nor is this reference difficult to be discovered. All languages know of brooks, or streams of tears, compare in Scripture, Lam. ii. 18; "Let tears run down like a river day and night"; iii. 48; also Job xxviii. 11, where inversely the gushing of the floods is called *weeping* (Marg.). The children of Israel placed themselves beside the streams of Babel because they saw in them the image and symbol of their floods of tears.—*E. W. Hengstenberg.*

Verse 1.—"We sat down." Among the poets, sitting on the ground is a mark of misery or captivity.

Multos illa dies incomtis moesta capillis

Sederat.—*Propercius.*

With locks unkempt, mournful, for many days

She sat.

O utinam ante tuos sedeam captiva penates.—*Propercius*

O might I sit a captive at thy gate!

You have the same posture in an old coin that celebrates a victory of Lucius Verus over the Parthians.

We find Judea on several coins of Vespasian and Titus in the posture that denotes sorrow and captivity.—*From Joseph Addison's Dialogues on Medals.*

Verse 1.—"Sat down" implies that the burst of grief was a long one, and also that it was looked on by the captives as some relaxation and repose.—*Chrysostom.*

Verse 1.—"We wept when we remembered Zion." A godly man lays to heart the miseries of the church. I have read of certain trees, whose leaves if cut or touched, the other leaves contract and shrink up themselves, and for a space hang down their heads; such a spiritual sympathy is there among Christians; when other parts of God's church suffer, they feel themselves, as it were, touched in their own persons. Ambrose reports, that when Theodosius was sick unto death, he was more troubled about the church of God than about his own sickness. When Æneas would have saved Anchises' life, saith he, "Far be it from me that I should desire to live when Troy is buried in its ruins." There are in music two unisons; if you strike one, you shall perceive the other to stir, as if it were affected: when the Lord strikes others a godly heart is deeply affected, Isa. xv. 11: "My bowels shall sound like an harp." Though it be well with a child of God in his own particular, and he dwells in an house of cedar, yet he grieves to see it go ill with the public. Queen Esther enjoyed the king's favour, and all the delights of the court, yet when a bloody warrant was signed for the death of the Jews she mourns and fasts, and ventures her own life to save theirs.—*Thomas Watson.*

Verse 1.—For *Sion* only they wept, unlike many who weep with the weeping and rejoice with the joy of Babylon, because their whole interests and affections are bound up in the things of this world.—*Augustine.*

Verse 1.—Let us weep, because in this life we are forced to sit by the waters of Babylon, and are yet strangers and as it were banished and barred from being satisfied with the pleasures of that river which gladdeth the city of God. Alas, if we did consider that our country were heaven, and did apprehend this place here below to be our prison, or place of banishment, the least absence from our country would draw tears from our eyes and sighs from our hearts, with David (Ps. cxx. 5): "Woe is me that I sojourn in Mesech, and am constrained to dwell in the tents of Kedar."

Do you remember how the Jews behaved themselves in the time of their exile and captivity, while they sat by the rivers and waters of Babylon? They wept, would not be comforted; hanged up their harps and instruments. What are the waters of Babylon but the pleasures and delights of the world, the waters of confusion, as the word signifies? Now when the people of God sit by them, that is to say, do not carelessly, but deliberately, with a settled consideration, see them slide by and pass away, and compare them with *Sion*, that is to say, with the inconceivable rivers of pleasure, which are permanent in the heavenly Jerusalem; how can they choose but weep, when they see themselves sitting by the one, and sojourning from the other? And it is worthy your observing, that notwithstanding the Jews had many causes of tears, the Chaldeans had robbed them of their goods, honours, countries, liberty, parents, children, friends: the chief thing, for all this, that they mourn for is their absence from *Sion*,—"We wept when we remembered thee, O *Sion*"—for their absence from Jerusalem. What should we then do for our absence from another manner of Jerusalem? Theirs was an earthly, old, robbed, spoiled, burned, sacked Jerusalem; ours a heavenly, new one, into which no arrow can be shot, no noise of the drum heard, nor sound of the trumpet, nor calling unto battle: who would not then weep, to be absent from hence?—"Walter Balcanqual, in "A Sermon Preached at St. Maries Spittle," 1623.

Verse 1.—"We remembered Zion." It necessarily implies they had forgot, else how could they now remember? In their peace and plenty they had but little regard of *Zion* then.—*John Whineop, in a Sermon entitled, "Israel's Tears for Distressed Zion,"* 1645.

Verse 1.—Nothing could present a more striking contrast to their native country than the region into which the Hebrews were transplanted. Instead of their irregular and picturesque mountain city, crowning its unequal heights, and looking down into its deep and precipitous ravines, through one of which a scanty stream wound along, they entered the vast, square, and level city of Babylon, occupying both sides of the broad Euphrates; while all around spread immense plains, which were intersected by long, straight canals, bordered by rows of willows. How unlike their national temple—a small but highly finished and richly adorned fabric, standing in the midst of its courts on the brow of a lofty precipice—the colossal temple of the Chaldean Bel, rising from the plain, with its eight stupendous stories or towers, one above the other, to the perpendicular height of a furlong: The palace of the Babylonian kings was more than twice the size of their whole city; it covered eight miles, with its hanging gardens built on arched terraces, each rising above the other, and rich in all the luxuriance of artificial cultivation. How different from the sunny cliffs of their own land, where the olive and the vine grew spontaneously, and the cool, shady, and secluded valleys, where they could always find shelter from the heat of the burning noon! No wonder then that, in the pathetic words of their own hymn, “*by the waters of Babylon they sat down and wept, when they remembered thee, O Zion.*” Of their general treatment as captives we know little. The Psalm above quoted seems to intimate that the Babylonians had taste enough to appreciate the poetical and musical talent of the exiles, and that they were summoned occasionally to amuse the banquets of their masters, though it was much against their will that they sang the songs of Zion in a strange land. In general it seems that the Jewish exiles were allowed to dwell together in considerable bodies, not sold as household or personal or prædial slaves, at least not those of the better order of whom the Captivity chiefly consisted. They were colonists rather than captives, and became by degrees possessed of considerable property. They had taken the advice of the prophet Jeremiah (who gave them no hopes of speedy return to their homes): they had built houses, planted gardens, married and brought up children, submitted themselves as peaceful subjects to the local authorities: all which implies a certain freedom, a certain degree of prosperity and comfort. They had free enjoyment of their religion, such at least as adhered faithfully to their belief in Jehovah. We hear of no special and general religious persecution.—*Henry Hart Milman (1791—1868), in “The History of the Jews.”*

Verse 1.—They sat in silence; they remembered in silence; they wept in silence.—*J. W. Burgon.*

Verses 1—6.—Israel was a typical people. 1. They were typical of God’s church in all ages of the world. And, 2. They were typical of the soul of every individual believer.

This Psalm is composed for Israel in her captivity. Let us go over it, taking its typical meaning.

I. *When a believer is in captivity he has a sorrowful remembrance of Zion.* So it was with God’s ancient people: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion” (verse 1). In the last chapter of 2 Chron. (14—20.) we find the melancholy tale of Judah’s captivity. Many of their friends had been slain by the sword—the house of God was burned—the walls of Jerusalem were broken down—and they themselves were captives in a foreign land. No wonder that they sat down and wept when they remembered Zion.

So it is often with the believer when led captive by sin—he sits down and weeps when he remembers Zion. Zion is the place where God makes himself known. When a poor awakened sinner is brought to know the Saviour, and to enter through the rent veil into the holiest of all, then he becomes one of the people of Zion: “A day in thy courts is better than a thousand.” He dwells in Zion; and the people that dwell therein are forgiven their iniquity. But when a believer falls into sin he falls into darkness—he is carried a captive away from Zion. No more does he find entrance within the veil; no more is he glad when they say to him, “Let us go up to the house of the Lord.” He sits down and weeps when he remembers Zion.

II. *The world derides the believer in his captivity.* So it was with ancient Israel. The Chaldeans were cruel conquerors. God says by his prophet,—“I was but a little displeased, and they helped forward the affliction.” Not only did they carry them away from their temple, their country, and their homes, but they made a

mock of their sorrows. When they saw them sit down to shed bitter tears by the rivers of Babylon, they demanded mirth and a song, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion."

So is it with the world and the captive Christian. There are times when the world does not mock at the Christian. Often the Christian is filled with so strange a joy that the world wonders in silence. Often there is a meek and quiet spirit in the Christian, which disarms opposition. The soft answer turneth away wrath; and his very enemies are forced to be at peace with him. But stop till the Christian's day of darkness comes—stop till sin and unbelief have brought him into captivity—stop till he is shut out from Zion, and carried afar off, and sits and weeps; then will the cruel world help forward the affliction—then will they ask for mirth and song; and when they see the bitter tear trickling down the cheek, they will ask with savage mockery, "Where is your Psalm-singing now?" "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." Even Christ felt this bitterness when he hung upon the cross.

III. *The Christian cannot sing in captivity.* So it was with ancient Israel. They were peculiarly attached to the sweet songs of Zion. They reminded them of the times of David and Solomon—when the temple was built, and Israel was in its greatest glory. They reminded them, above all, of their God, of their temple, and the services of the sanctuary. Three times a year they came up from the country in companies, singing these sweet songs of Zion—lifting their eyes to the hills whence came their help. But now, when they were in captivity, they hanged their harps upon the willows; and when their cruel spoilers demanded mirth and a song, they said: "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" So is it with the believer in darkness. He hangs his harp upon the willows, and cannot sing the song of the Lord. Every believer has got a harp. Every heart that has been made new is turned into a harp of praise. The mouth is filled with laughter—the tongue with divinest melody. Every true Christian loves praise—the holiest Christians love it most. But when the believer falls into sin and darkness, his harp is on the willows, and he cannot sing the Lord's song, for he is in a strange land.

1. *He loses all sense of pardon.* It is the sense of pardon that gives its sweetest tones to the song of the Christian. But when a believer is in captivity he loses this sweet sense of forgiveness, and therefore cannot sing.

2. *He loses all sense of the presence of God.* It is the sweet presence of God with the soul that makes the believer sing. But when that presence is away, the Lord's house is but a howling wilderness; and you say, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

3. *He loses sight of the heavenly Canaan.* The sight of the everlasting hills draws forth the heavenly melodies of the believing soul. But when a believer sins, and is carried away captive, he loses this hope of glory. He sits and weeps—he hangs his harp upon the willows, and cannot sing the Lord's song in a strange land.

4. *The believer in darkness still remembers Zion, and prefers it above his chief joy.* He often finds, when he has fallen into sin and captivity, that he has fallen among worldly delights and worldly friends. A thousand pleasures tempt him to take up his rest here; but if he be a true child of Zion he will never settle down in a strange land. He will look over all the pleasures of the world and the pleasures of sin, and say, "A day in thy courts is better than a thousand"—"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning."—*Condensed from Robert Murray M'Chayne, 1813—1843.*

Verses 1, 2.—The Psalm is universally admired. Indeed, nothing can be more exquisitely beautiful. It is written in a strain of sensibility that must touch every soul that is capable of feeling. It is remarkable that Dr. Watts, in his excellent versification, has omitted it. He has indeed some verses upon it in his Lyrics; and many others have written on this ode. We have seen more than ten productions of this kind; the last, and perhaps the best, of which is Lord Byron's. But who is satisfied with any of these attempts? Thus it begins: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion." These rivers were probably some of the streams branching off from the Euphrates and Tigris. Here it is commonly supposed these captive Jews were placed by their task-masters, to preserve or repair the water-works. But is it improper to conjecture that the Psalmist refers to their being here; not constantly, but occasionally; not by compulsion, but choice? Hither I imagine their retiring, to unbend their oppressed minds in solitude. "Come," said one of these pious Jews to another, "come, let us for a while go forth, from this vanity and vileness. Let us assemble together

by ourselves under the refreshing shade of the willows by the watercourses. And let us take our harps with us, and solace ourselves with some of the songs of Zion." But as soon as they arrive, and begin to touch the chords, the notes—such is the power of association—awaken the memory of their former privileges and pleasures. And, overwhelmed with grief, they sit down on the grass; and weep when they remember Zion; their dejected looks, averted from each other, seeming to say, "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." But what do they with their harps? The voice of mirth is heard no more, and all the daughters of music are brought low. Melody is not in season to a distressed spirit. "Is any afflicted? Let him pray. Is any merry? Let him sing Psalms." "As he that taketh away a garment in cold weather, and as vinegar upon nitre, so is he that singeth songs to a heavy heart." They did not, however, break them to pieces, or throw them into the stream—but *hanged* them up only. They hoped that what they could not use at present they might be able to resume at some happier period. To be cast down is not to be destroyed. Distress is not despondency.

"Beware of desperate steps: the darkest day,
Live till to-morrow, will have passed away."

"We *hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.*" Let us pass from the Jew to the Christian; and let us survey the Christian in his SPIRITUAL SORROWS. He who would preach well, says Luther, must distinguish well. It is peculiarly necessary to discriminate, when we enter upon the present subject. For all the sorrows of the Christian are not of the same kind or descent. Let us consider four sources of his moral sadness.

I. The first will be *physical*. II. The second will be *criminal*. III. The third will be *intellectual*. IV. The fourth will be *pious*.—William Jay, in "*The Christian Contemplated*."

Verse 2.—"*Our harps.*" Many singers were carried captives: Ezra ii. 41. These would of course carry their instruments with them, and be insulted, as here. Their songs were sacred, and unfit to be sung before idolaters.—From "*Anonymous Notes*" in James Merrick's *Annotations*, 1768.

Verse 2.—"*Willows.*" All the flat, whereon Babylon stood, being by reason of so many rivers and canals running through it made in many places marshy, especially near the said rivers and canals, this caused it to abound much in willows, and therefore it is called in Scripture the "Valley of Willows"; for so the words in Isaiah xv. 7, which we translate "the brook of the willows," ought to be rendered.—Humphrey Prideaux (1648—1724), in "*The Old and New Testament Connected*," etc.

Verse 2.—"*Willows.*" The Weeping Willow of Babylon will grow to be a large tree; its branches being long, slender, and pendulous, makes it proper to be planted upon the banks of rivers, ponds, and over springs; the leaves, also, are long and narrow; and when any mist or dew falls, a drop of water is seen hanging at their extremities, which, together with their hanging branches, cause a most lugubrious appearance. Lovers' garlands are said to have been made of a species of this willow, the branches of which are very slender and pliable; and the plant itself has always been sought after for ornamental plantations, either to mix with others of the like growth in the largest quarters, or to be planted out singly over springs, or in large opens, for the peculiar variety occasioned by its mournful look.—John Evelyn (1620—1706), in "*Silva*;" or, *A Discourse of Forest-Trees*."

Verse 2.—"*Willows.*" It is a curious fact, that during the Commonwealth of England, when Cromwell, like a wise politician, allowed them to settle in London and to have synagogues, the Jews came hither in sufficient numbers to celebrate the feast of Tabernacles in booths, among the *Willows* on the borders of the 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 a spectacle, induced many to press too closely round their camp, and perhaps intrude upon their privacy.—Maria Callcott (1788—1842), in "*A Scripture Herbal*," 1842.

Verse 2.—"*Willows.*" There is a pretty story told about the way in which the

Weeping Willow was introduced into England.* Many years ago, the well-known poet, Alexander Pope, who resided at Twickenham, received a basket of figs as a present from Turkey. The basket was made of the supple branches of the Weeping Willow, the very same species under which the captive Jews sat when they wept by the waters of Babylon. "*We hanged our harps upon the willows.*" The poet valued highly the small slender twigs as associated with so much that was interesting, and he untwisted the basket, and planted one of the branches on the ground. It had some tiny buds upon it, and he hoped he might be able to rear it, as none of this species of willow was known in England. Happily the willow is very quick to take root and grow. The little branch soon became a tree, and drooped gracefully over the river, in the same manner that its race had done over the waters of Babylon. From that one branch all the Weeping Willows in England are descended.—*Mary and Elizabeth Kirby, in "Chapters on Trees," 1873.*

Verse 2.—"*In the midst thereof.*" This is most naturally understood of the *city* of Babylon; which was there as large as Middlesex, and had parks and gardens inside it.—*William Kay.*

Verse 3.—"*They that carried us away captive required of us a song*"; or rather, as it should be rendered, "*the words of a song.*" They see no inconsistency in a religion which freely mixes with the world. In their ignorance they only require "*the words of a song*"; its heavenly strain they have never caught. "*They that wasted us required of us mirth.*" Remember, it is this worldly element which wasteth, or lays on heaps, whether so far as our own hearts or the church of God is concerned. But, true to his spiritual instincts, the child of God replies, "*How shall we sing Jehovah's song in the land of a stranger?*" and then, so far from being utterly cast down or overcome, rises with fresh outburst of resolution and intenseness of new vigour, to utter the vows of verses 5 and 6. For, after having passed through such a spiritual conflict, we come forth, not wearied, but refreshed; not weaker, but stronger. It is one of the seeming contradictions of the gospel, that the cure of weariness, and the relief of heavy-ladenness, lies in this—to *take the cross upon ourselves.* After the night-long conflict of Israel, "as he passed over Peniel, the sun rose upon him," and that though "he halted upon his thigh."—*Alfred Edersheim.*

Verse 3.—"*Sing us one of the songs of Zion.*" It is variously set down as simple curiosity to hear something of the famous melodies of the Hebrew people; as well-meaning counsel to the exiles to reconcile themselves to their inevitable situation, and to resume their former habits in social harmony with the inhabitants of the land; or, most generally as a fresh aggravation of their misery, in requiring them to make sport for their new masters.—*Genebrardus, Chrysostom, and Cocceius, in Neale and Littledale.*

Verse 3.—"*Sing us one of the songs of Zion.*" No music will serve the epicures in the prophet but temple music: Amos. vi. 5, "They invent to themselves instruments of music like David." As choice and excellent as David was in the service of the temple, so would they be in their private feasts. Belshazzar's draughts are not half so sweet in other vessels as in the utensils of the temple: Dan. v. 2, "He commanded to bring forth the golden and silver vessels that were taken out of the house of God." So the Babylonian humour is pleased with nothing so much as with "*one of the songs of Zion*;" not an ordinary song, but "*Sing us one of your songs of Zion.*" No jest relisheth with a profane spirit so well as when Scripture is abused, and made to lackey to their sportive jollity. Vain man thinketh he can never put honour enough upon his pleasures, and scorn enough upon God and holy things.—*Thomas Manton.*

Verse 3.—"*Sing us one of the songs of Zion.*" The insulting nature of the demand will become the more conspicuous, if we consider, that the usual subjects of these songs were the omnipotence of Jehovah, and his love towards his chosen people.—*William Keatinge Clay, 1839.*

Verse 3.—The Babylonians asked them in derision for one of the songs of Zion. They loaded with ridicule their pure and venerable religion, and aggravated the sufferings of the weary and oppressed exiles by their mirth and their indecency. We are sorry to say that the resemblance still holds betwixt the Jews in a state of captivity and the Christians in the state of their pilgrimage. We have also

* The two preceding extracts would seem to prove that this story is not true; at least Evelyn's willow is evidently the weeping willow, and would seem to have long been known.

to sustain the mockery of the profane and the unthinking. Ridicule and disdain are often the fate of sincere piety in this world. Fashion and frivolity and false philosophy have made a formidable combination against us; and the same truth, the same honesty, the same integrity of principle, which in any other cause would be esteemed as manly and respectable, is despised and laughed at when attached to the cause of the gospel and its sublime interests.—*Thomas Chalmers.*

Verses 3, 4.—St. John Chrysostom observes the improvement such tribulation effected in the Jews, who previously derided, nay, even put to death, some of the prophets; but now that they were captives in a foreign land, they would not attempt to expose their sacred hymns to the ridicule of the Gentiles.—*Robert Bellarmine.*

Verse 4.—“*How shall we sing the LORD's song in a strange land?*” Now, is it not true that, in many senses, we, like the Jewish exiles, have to sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If not a land strange to us, then, all the more strange to it—a land foreign, so to say, and alien to the Lord's song. The very life which we live here in the body is a life of sight and sense. Naturally we walk by sight; and to sing the Lord's song is possible only to faith. Faith is the soul's sight: faith is seeing the Invisible: this comes not of nature, and without this we cannot sing the Lord's song, because we are in a land strange to it.

Again, the feelings of the present life are often adverse to praise. The exiles in Babylon could not sing because they were in heaviness. God's hand was heavy upon them. He had a controversy with them for their sins. Now the feelings of many of us are in like manner adverse to the Lord's song. Some of us are in great sorrow. We have lost a friend; we are in anxiety about one who is all to us; we know not which way to turn for to-morrow's bread or for this day's comfort. How can we sing the Lord's song?

And there is another kind of sorrow, still more fatal, if it be possible, to the lively exercise of adoration. And that is, a weight and burden of unforgiven sin. Songs may be heard from the prison-cell of Philippi; songs may be heard from the calm death-bed, or by the open grave; but songs cannot be drawn forth from the soul on which the load of God's displeasure, real or imagined, is lying, or which is still powerless to apprehend the grace and the life for sinners which is in Christ Jesus. That, we imagine, was the difficulty which pressed upon the exile Israelite; that certainly is an impediment now, in many, to the outburst of Christian praise. And again, there is a land yet more strange and foreign to the Lord's song even than the land of unforgiven guilt—and that is the land of unforsaken sin.—*Condensed from C. J. Vaughan.*

Verse 4.—“*The Lord's song—in a strange land.*” It was the contrast, it was the incongruity which perplexed them. The captives in Babylon—that huge, unwieldy city, with its temple of the Chaldean Bel towering aloft on its eight stupendous stories to the height of a furlong into the sky—the Israelite exiles, bidden there to an idolatrous feast, that they might make sport for the company by singing to them one of the far-famed Hebrew melodies, for the gratification of curiosity or the amusement of the ear—how could it be done? *The Lord's song*—one of those inspired compositions of Moses or David, in which the saintly soul of the king or the prophet poured itself forth in lowliest, loftiest adoration, before the one Divine Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier—how could it be sung, they ask, in a scene so incongruous? The words would languish upon the tongue, the notes would refuse to sound upon the disused harp. Such Psalmody requires its accompaniment and its adaptation—if not actually in the Temple-courts of Zion, yet at least in the balmy gales of Palestine and the believing atmosphere of Israel.—*C. J. Vaughan, in “The Family Prayer and Sermon Book.”*

Verse 4.—“*The Lord's song.*” These songs of old, to distinguish them from heathenish songs, were called God's songs, the Lord's songs; because taught by him, learned of him, and commanded by him to be sung to his praise.—*John Bunyan.*

Verse 4.—Many were the sad thoughts which the remembrance of Zion would call up: the privileges they had there enjoyed; the solemn feasts and happy meetings of their tribes to worship there before the Lord; the Temple—“the beautiful house where their fathers had worshipped”—now laid waste.

But the one embittering thought that made them indeed heavy at heart, silenced their voices, and unstrung their harps, was the cause of this calamity—their sin. Paul and Silas could sing in a dungeon, but it was not their sin brought them there:

and so the saints suffering for the name of Christ could say, "we are exceeding joyful in all our tribulation." There is no real sorrow in any circumstances into which God brings us, or where he leads and goes with us; but where sin is, and suffering is felt to be—not persecution, but—judgment, there is and can be no joy; the soul refuses to be comforted. Israel cannot sing beside the waters of Babylon.—*William De Burgh.*

Verse 4.—There is a distinction between us and God's ancient people; for at that time the worship of God was confined to one place; but now he has his temple wherever two or three are met together in Christ's name, if they separate themselves from all idolatrous profession, and maintain purity of Divine worship.—*John Calvin.*

Verse 4.—It is one of the pathetic touches about the English captivity of King John II. of France, that once sitting as a guest to see a great tournament held in his honour, he looked on sorrowfully, and being urged by some of those about him to be cheerful and enjoy the splendid pageant, he answered with a mournful smile, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"—*Polydore Virgil, —1555.*

Verse 5.—"If I forget thee, O Jerusalem." Calvary, Mount of Olives, Siloam, how fragrant are ye with the Name that is above every name! "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem!" Can I forget where he walked so often, where he spake such gracious words, where he died? Can I forget that his feet shall stand on that "Mount of Olives, which is before Jerusalem, on the east?" Can I forget that there stood the Upper Room, and there fell the showers of Pentecost?—*Andrew A. Bonar.*

Verse 5.—"Let my right hand forget her cunning." There is a striking and appropriate point in this, which has been overlooked. It is, that, as it is customary for people in the East to swear by their professions, so one who has no profession—who is poor and destitute, and has nothing of recognized value in the world—swears by his right hand, which is his sole stake in society, and by the "cunning" of which he earns his daily bread. Hence the common Arabic proverb (given by Burckhardt) reflecting on the change of demeanour produced by improved circumstances:—"He was wont to swear 'by the cutting off of his right hand!' He now swears 'by the giving of money to the poor.'" The words, "her cunning," are supplied by the translators, in whose time *cunning* (from the Saxon *cannan*, Dutch *kennen*, "to know") meant "skill;" and a cunning man was what we should now call a skilful man. In the present case the skill indicated is doubtless that of playing on the harp, in which particular sense it occurs so late as Prior:—

"When Pedro does the lute command,
She guides the cunning artist's hand."

Modern translators substitute "skill;" but perhaps a term still more general would be better—such as, "May my right hand lose its power."—*John Kitto, in "The Pictorial Bible."*

Verse 5.—"Let my right hand forget." Something must be supplied from the context . . . the playing on the stringed instrument, verse 2, whether the right hand should be applied to the purpose or not, was the point in question. Then, the punishment also perfectly accords with the misdeed, as in Job xxxi. 22: "If I, misapplying my right hand to the playing of joyful strains on my instrument, forget thee, Jerusalem, let my right hand, as a punishment, forget the noble art; and then also verse 6 fits admirably to what goes before: May my misemployed hand lose its capacity to play, and my tongue, misemployed in singing cheerful songs, its capacity to sing.—*E. W. Hengstenberg.*

Verse 6.—"If I do not remember thee." Either our beds are soft, or our hearts hard, that can rest when the church is at unrest, that feel not our brethren's hard cords through our soft beds.—*John Trapp.*

Verse 6.—"If I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy." Literally, "if I advance not Jerusalem above the head of my joy." If I set not Jerusalem as a diadem on the head of my rejoicing, and crown all my happiness with it.—*Christopher Wordsworth.*

Verse 7.—"Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom," etc. The Jews were their brethren: Obad. 10; Amos i. 11. They were their neighbours, Idumea and Judea bordered upon one another: Mark iii. 8. They were confederates with

the Jews (Jer. xxvii. 3 : an Edomitish ambassador was at Jerusalem), who, together with the ambassadors of the other kings there mentioned, were strengthening themselves with Zedekiah against Nebuchadnezzar; see Obad. 7. For them, therefore, to revenge themselves for former wrongs done them upon the Jews, and that in the day of their calamity, this made their sin exceeding sinful.—*William Greenhill, 1591—1677.*

Verse 7.—“Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom,” etc. Of all kinds of evil speaking against our brother, this sin of Edom, to sharpen an enemy against our brother in the day of his sorrow and distress, this opening of the mouth wide against him, to insult over him in his calamity, is most barbarous and unchristian. . . . Observe how the cruelty of the Edomites is aggravated by the time; the wofullest time that ever Jerusalem had, called therefore “*the day of Jerusalem.*” When all things conspired to make their sorrow full, then, in the anguish and fit of their mortal disease, then did Edom arm his eye, his tongue, his heart, his hand, and join all those with the enemy against his brother. Learn, that God taketh notice not only *what* we do against another, but *when*; for he will set these things in order before us; for the God of mercy cannot abide cruelty.—*Edward Marburg, 1649.*

Verse 7.—“Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom.” Edom shall be remembered for the mischievous counsel he gave; and the daughter of Babylon shall be for ever razed out of memory for razing Jerusalem to the ground. And let all the secret and open enemies of God’s church take heed how they employ their tongues and hands against God’s secret ones: they that presume to do either may here read their fatal doom written in the *dust* of Edom, and in the *ashes* of Babylon.—*Daniel Featley (1582—1645), in “Clavis Mystica.”*

Verse 7.—In Herod, the Idumean, Edom’s hatred found its concentrated expression. His attempt was to destroy him whom God had laid in Zion as the “sure foundation.”—*William Kay.*

Verse 7.—It may be observed that the Jews afterward acted the same part toward the Christian church which the Edomites had acted toward them, encouraging and stirring up the Gentiles to persecute and destroy it from off the face of the earth. And God “remembered” them for the Christians’ sakes, as they prayed him to “remember Edom” for their sakes. Learn we hence, what a crime it is, for Christians to assist the common enemy, or call in the common enemy to assist them, against their brethren.—*George Horne.*

Verse 7.—We are not to regard the imprecations of this Psalm in any other light than as prophetic. They are grounded on the many prophecies which had already gone forth on the subject of the destruction of Babylon, if, as we may admit, the Psalm before us was written after the desolation of Jerusalem. But these prophecies have not yet been fulfilled in every particular, and remain to be accomplished in mystic Babylon, when the dominion of Antichrist shall be for ever swept away, and the true church introduced into the glorious liberty of the sons of God, at the appearing of their Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in his own kingdom.—*William Wilson.*

Verse 7.—Edom’s hatred was the hatred with which the carnal mind in its natural enmity against God always regards whatever is the elect object of his favour. Jerusalem was the city of God. “Rase it, rase it even to the ground,” is the mischerevise desire of every unregenerate mind against every building that rests on the elect Stone of Divine foundation. For God’s election never pleases man until, through grace, his own heart has become an adoring receiver of that mercy which while in his natural state he angrily resented and refused to own in its effects on other men. From Cain to Antichrist this solemn truth holds always good.—*Arthur Pridham.*

Verse 7—9.—I do not know if the same feeling has occurred to others, but I have often wished the latter verses of this Psalm had been disjoined from this sweet and touching beginning. It sounds as if one of the strings on their well-tuned harps was out of melody, as if it struck a jarring note of discord. And yet I know the feeling is wrong, for it is no more than what the Lord himself had foretold and declared should be the final desolation of proud Babylon itself: yet one longs more intensely for the period when the nations of the earth shall learn war no more; and every harp and every voice, even those of the martyred ones beneath God’s altar loudest and sweetest of all, shall sing the Lord’s songs, the song of Moses, and the Lamb, in that pleasant land, where no sighing and no tears are seen.—*Barton Bouchier.*

Verse 8.—“*O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed.*” In the beginning of the fifth year of Darius happened the revolt of the Babylonians which cost him the trouble of a tedious siege again to reduce them . . . he besieged the city with all his forces . . . As soon as the Babylonians saw themselves begirt by such an army as they could not cope with in the field, they turned their thoughts wholly to the supporting of themselves in the siege; in order whereto they took a resolution, the most desperate and barbarous that ever any nation practised. For to make their provisions last the longer, they agreed to cut off all unnecessary mouths among them, and therefore drawing together all the women and children, they strangled them all, whether wives, sisters, daughters, or young children useless for the wars, excepting only that every man was allowed to save one of his wives, which he best loved, and a maid-servant to do the work of the house.—*Humphrey Prideaux.*

Verse 8.—“*Who art to be destroyed.*” *הַמַּרְשֵׁת* has been explained in a variety of ways. Seventy: *ἡ κατακλιπυρος*; Vulg. *misera*: others, *destroyer, powerful, violent, or fierce.* Perhaps it best suits the context to regard it as expressing what is already accomplished: it is so certain, in the view of the Psalmist, that the ruin will come, that he uses the past participle, as if the work were now completed. “*O daughter of Babylon, the destroyed!*”—“*Bibliotheca Sacra and Theological Review.*”

Verse 8.—He that sows evil shall reap evil; he that soweth the evil of sin, shall reap the evil of punishment. So Eliphaz told Job that he had seen (Job iv. 8), “they that plough iniquity, and sow wickedness, reap the same.” And that either in kind or quality, proportion or quantity. In kind, the very same that he did to others shall be done to him; or in proportion, a measure answerable to it. So he shall reap what he hath sown, in quality or in quantity; either in portion the same, or in proportion the like. The prophet cursing Edom and Babel saith thus, “*O daughter of Zion, happy shall he be that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.*” The original is, “that recompenseth to thee thy deed which thou didst to us.” . . . Thus is wickedness recompensed *suo genere*, in its own kind. So often the transgressor is against the transgressor, the thief robs the thief, *proditoris proditor*; as in Rome many unchristened emperors, and many christened popes, by blood and treason got the sovereignty, and by blood and treason lost it. Evil men drink of their own brewing, are scourged with their own rod, drowned in the pit which they digged for others, as Haman was hanged on his own gallows, Perillus tormented in his own engine!—*Thomas Adams.*

Verses 8, 9.—The subject of these two verses is the same with that of many chapters in Isaiah and Jeremiah; namely, the vengeance of heaven executed upon Babylon by Cyrus, raised up to be king of the Medes and Persians, united under him for that purpose. The meaning of the words, “*Happy shall he be,*” is, He shall go on and prosper, for the Lord of hosts shall go with him, and fight his battles against the enemy and oppressor of his people, empowering him to recompense upon the Chaldeans the works of their hands, and to reward them as they served Israel.—*George Horne.*

Verses 8, 9.—It needs no record to tell us that, in the siege and carrying away of Jerusalem, great atrocities were committed by the conquerors. We may be quite sure that

“Many a childing mother then
And new-born baby died.”

for the wars of the old world were always attended by such barbarous cruelties. The apostrophe of verses 8, 9, consequently merely proclaims the certainty of a just retribution—of the same retribution that the prophets had foretold (Isa. xiii. 16; xlvii.; Jer. l.; compare, “*who art to be destroyed, verse 8,* and the happiness of those who should be its ministers; who should mete out to her what she had measured to the conquered Jew. It was the decree of Heaven that their “*children*” should “*be dashed to pieces before their eyes.*” The Psalmist simply recognizes the decree as just and salutary; he pronounces the terrible vengeance to have been deserved. To charge him with vindictiveness, therefore, is to impugn the justice and mercy of the Most High. And there is nothing to sustain the charge, for his words are simply a prediction, like that of the prophet, “*As thou hast done, it shall be done unto thee; thy reward shall return upon thine own head:*” Obad. 15.—*Joseph Hammond, in “The Expositor,” 1876.*

Verse 9.—"Happy shall he be that taketh," etc. That is, so oppressive hast thou been to all under thy domination, as to become universally hated and detested; so that those who may have the last hand in thy destruction, and the total extermination of thy inhabitants, shall be reputed "happy"—shall be celebrated and extolled as those who have rid the world of a curse so grievous. These prophetic declarations contain no excitement to any person or persons to commit acts of cruelty and barbarity; but are simply declarative of what would take place in the order of the retributive providence and justice of God, and the general opinion that should in consequence be expressed on the subject; therefore praying for the destruction of our enemies is totally out of the question.—*Adam Clarke.*

Verse 9.—"Happy shall he be," etc. With all possible might and speed oppose the very first risings and movings of the heart to sin; for these are the buds that produce the bitter fruit; and if sin be not nipped in the very bud, it is not imaginable how quickly it will shoot forth. . . . Now these sins, though they may seem small in themselves, yet are exceedingly pernicious in their effects. These little foxes destroy the grapes as much or more than the greater, and therefore are to be diligently sought out, hunted, and killed by us, if we would keep our hearts fruitful. We should deal with these first streamings out of sin as the Psalmist would have the people of God deal with the brats of Babylon: "Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones." And without doubt most happy and successful will that man prove in his spiritual welfare, who puts on no bowels of pity even to his infant corruptions, but slays the small as well as the great; and so not only conquers his enemies by opposing their present force, but also by extinguishing their future race. The smallest children, if they live, will be grown men; and the first motions of sin, if they are let alone, will spread into great, open, and audacious presumptions.—*Robert South, 1633—1716.*

Verse 9.—"Against the stones." That *באבנים* signifies a rock, is undubitable, from the concurrent testimony of all the best Hebrew lexicographers. Hence it follows, because there is no rock, nor mountain, nor hill, either in the city or in the province of ancient Babylonia, that the locality, against which the malediction of this Psalm is hurled, cannot be the metropolis of the ancient Assyrian empire, but must be apocalyptic Babylon, or Papal Rome, built upon seven hills, one of which is the celebrated Tarpeian Rock. But the eighth verse emphatically declares that the retributive justice of God will visit upon apocalyptic Babylon, the same affliction which Assyrian Babylon, and also Pagan Rome, inflicted upon Jerusalem. As therefore Nebuchadnezzar as well as Titus "burnt the house of the Lord, and the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem, and every great man's house burnt he with fire" (2 Kings xxv. 9) so "the ten horns shall hate the whore, and shall make her desolate and naked, and shall eat her flesh, and burn her with fire; and she shall be utterly burned with fire" (Rev. xvii. 16; xviii. 8). When the Canaanites had filled up the measure of their iniquity, Israel received a divine commission to exterminate the guilty nation. When Papal Rome shall have filled up the measure of her iniquity, then "a mighty angel will take up a stone, like a great millstone, and will cast it into the sea, saying, Thus with violence shall that great city Babylon be thrown down": "For her sins have reached unto heaven, and God hath remembered her iniquities. Reward her even as she rewarded you, and double unto her double according to her works: in the cup which she hath filled fill to her double" (Rev. xviii. 5, 6). Then shall issue the divine proclamation: "Rejoice over her, thou heaven, and ye holy apostles and prophets; for God hath avenged you on her" (Rev. xviii. 20).—*John Noble Coleman, in "The Book of Psalms, with Notes," 1863.*

Verse 9.—"He that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones."

My heroes slain, my bridal bed o'erturned,
My daughters ravish'd, and my city burn'd,
My bleeding infants dash'd against the floor;
These have I yet to see, perhaps yet more.

Homer's Iliad, Pope's Translation, Book xxii. 89—91.

HINTS TO PREACHERS.

Verse 1.—I. A duty once the source of joy: "remember Zion." II. Circumstances which make the remembrances sorrowful. III. Peculiar persons who feel this joy or sorrow: "we."

Verse 1.—I. Zion forsaken in prosperity. Its services neglected; its priests demoralized; the worship of Baal and of Ashtaroth preferred to the worship of the true God. II. Zion remembered in adversity. In Babylon more than in Jerusalem; on the banks of the Euphrates more than on the banks of Jordan; with tears when they might have remembered it with joy. "I spake unto thee in thy prosperity, and thou saidst, I will not hear." "Lord, in trouble they have visited thee. They poured out a prayer when thy chastening was upon them."—*G. R.*

Verse 2.—I. Harps—or capacities for praise. II. Harps on willows, or song suspended. III. Harps retuned, or joys to come.

Verse 2.—I. A confession of joy being turned into sorrow: "we hanged," etc. The moaning of their harps upon weeping willows better harmonized with their feelings than any tunes which they had been accustomed to play. II. A hope of sorrow being turned into joy. They took their harps with them into captivity, and hung them up for future use.—*G. R.*

Verse 2.—"We hanged our harps," etc. I. In remembrance of lost joys. Their harps were associated with a glorious past. They could not afford to forget that past. They kept up the good old custom. There are always means of remembrance at hand. II. In manifestation of present sorrow. They could not play on account of, 1. Their sinfulness. 2. Their circumstances. 3. Their home. III. In anticipation of future blessing. They did not dash their harps to pieces. Term of exile limited. Return expressly foretold. We shall want our harps in the good times coming. Sinners play their harps now, but must soon lay them aside for ever.—*W. J.*

Verse 3 (last clause).—Taken away from the text this is a very pleasant and praiseworthy request. Why do we wish for such a song? 1. It is sure to be pure. 2. It will certainly be elevating. 3. It will probably be gladsome. 4. It will comfort and enliven us. 5. It will help to express our gratitude.

Verses 3, 4.—I. The cruel demand. 1. A song when we are captives. 2. A song to please our adversaries. 3. A holy song for unholy purposes. II. The motive for it. Sometimes mere ridicule; at others, mistaken kindness seeking by sharpness to arouse us from despondency; often mere levity. III. The answer to it, "How can?" etc.

Verses 3, 4.—I. When God calls for joy we ought not to sorrow. The songs of Zion should be sung in Zion. II. When God calls for sorrow we ought not to rejoice. "How shall we sing?" etc. See *Is. v. 12.*—*G. R.*

Verses 3, 4.—I. The unreasonable request: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." This was—1. A striking testimony to the joyful character of Jehovah's worship. Even the heathen had heard of "the songs of Zion." 2. A severe trial of the fidelity of captive Israel. It might have been to their present advantage to have complied with the request. 3. A cruel taunt of the sad and desponding condition of the captives. II. The indignant refusal. "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" There is no singing this song by true Israelites—1. When the heart is out of tune, as it must necessarily be when in "a strange land." 2. In uncongenial society—amongst unsympathetic strangers. 3. For un sanctified purposes—to make mirth for the heathen. Many so-called sacred concerts pain devout Christians as much as the demand to sing the Lord's song did the devout Israelites. The Lord's song must be sung only "to the Lord;"—*W. H. J. P.*

Verses 3, 4.—The burlesque of holy things. I. The servants of God are in an unsympathetic world. II. The demand to be amused and entertained. Temple songs to pass an idle hour! Such the popular demand to-day. Men would have us burlesque religion to tickle them. III. The justly indignant reply of all true men, "How shall we?" Christian workers have more serious if less popular business on hand.—*W. B. H.*

Verse 5.—The person who remembers; the thing remembered; the solemn imprecation.

Verse 5.—No harp but for Jesus.

I. The harp consecrated. At conversion.

“ One sword, at least, thy rights shall guard,
One faithful harp shall praise thee.”

II. The harp silent :

“ Thy songs were made for the brave and free,
They shall never sound in slavery.”

III. The harp re-strung above :

“ And I heard the voice of harpers
Harping with their harps.”

W. B. H.

Verses 5, 6.—I. To rejoice with the world is to forget the church. II. To love the church we must prefer her above everything. III. To serve the church we must be prepared to suffer anything.

Verse 7.—The hatred of the ungodly to true religion. I. Its cause. II. Its extent. “Rase it,” etc. III. Its season for display : “ in the day of Jerusalem ” —trouble, etc. IV. Its reward : “ Remember, O Lord.”

