

## “The Refugees’ Rage”

by Greg Smith-Young (Elora-Bethany Pastoral Charge)

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Psalm 137

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By the waters of Babylon. . . . This Psalm 137 is beautiful. And ugly. Every line alive with pain.<sup>1</sup> Pain in artistic poignancy. Pain in white-hot rage. A song carved by refugees.

Some of us are refugees. Many of us have chosen to walk with refugees.

Maybe “chosen” is not the right word. We have been drawn, compelled. Pathos seized us, and we had to say “Yes! What can I do?” This is admirable, generous and right. It feels good. Except, when it does not feel good.

This Psalm is a song of some refugees, composed to help them pray their pain. Some of my foremothers and fathers were refugees, but I am not.<sup>2</sup> So I need to hear this song, beautiful and ugly, so I can walk with refugees . . . with you.

### II

Part One: Grief by the waters of Babylon. . . .

Fly back over twenty-six centuries, to that ancient superpower. Its waters are the iconic Tigris and Euphrates rivers, and the sophisticated networks of canals engineered from them. From their fertility can be fed the growing, multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan population.

Including the Judeans, Jews, the refugees of Israel. Stolen from their home, their beautiful Jerusalem. Its holy Temple—that physical focus of their faith, their spiritual traditions and practices—ruined. So also their hearts, ruined.

*They dragged us off, prisoners for their prosperity, forced to serve. They command us: “Sing! Play us a tune! One of your back-home ditties. We’ll smile, tap our toes out of rhythm, then remix it to our own tastes.” We will not sing. Our sacred songs sound obscene when sung out of place, dislocated.<sup>3</sup> We refuse to be a curiosity!*

By the waters of Babylon. . . . the waters of the Grand and Irvine, Carroll and Swan creeks, Belwood Lake. Our waters. By them, refugees will sit. They will weep.

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<sup>1</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 459.

<sup>2</sup> Some of my family lines trace through refugees (though they were not called that in their day): William Stephen, a great-great-great-great grandfather who left religious persecution in Ireland in the mid-19th century; Archibald Thomson, a 5-greats uncle who came to Canada after the American Revolution (refugees like him were dignified with the term “Loyalist.”); my 9-greats grandfather Joseph Loomis who was part of the mass exodus of Puritans from England to New England in the 1620s-1640s.

<sup>3</sup> “The songs of Zion are pornographic when they are sung among those who do not hope in Zion.” Walter Bruggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 75.

Will we ask them to sing?

Of course, we are not Babylon. We are not the armies, gangs, thugs and brutality. We are not the fear that forces them here.

We are the welcomers, the helpers, the refuge.

But we are not home. And those to whom we give refuge are not curiosities! They might not want to sing for us. Is that okay?

### III

Part Two: From grief to defiance.

*“Jerusalem, if I forget you,  
Let my right hand forget  
what it's supposed to do.”<sup>4</sup>*

It's so personal, a lament to a lost love, a romance ripped, apart.

For a city! Can one pine for a city? Can a place take one's heart?

Of course.

This may be hard for us to get, in our peculiar culture. We easily relocate from place to place. How strange is this? I have no idea where I will be buried. There is no common family site. My ancestors lie scattered. For many of us that's normal. See how abnormal we are?

For most, place matters. Stolen from home, the Refugee of the Psalm refuses to *“move on.”* Refuses *“closure.”* Has no tolerance for *“Someday you'll find someone else.”* The Refugee refuses all our glib strategies for avoiding grief. Refuses to forget! Refuses to drink our amnesia.

The Refugee knows that the rest of the world will try to bury it in mass graves. If caught out, leaders will say they did not know. The powers will protest that they were powerless. They might even apologize, and promise to do better next time. They will count on us forgetting. Maybe we'll want to.

The Refugee lover cries. *“I will not forget!”*

As we sit with the lovers and their cries, it will pain our open hearts. We want them to be home, here. We want them to belong, with us.

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<sup>4</sup> Contemporary singer Matisyahu's lyric in his song “Jerusalem,” based on Psalm 137:5-6.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem\\_\(Out\\_of\\_Darkness\\_Comes\\_Light\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem_(Out_of_Darkness_Comes_Light))

Will we be okay if they cannot be? If they refuse to forget?

#### IV

Part Three. The last. The tail-end. The verses often cut out. (Thank you, choir, for leaving them in.)

When he was setting this Psalm to music, hymn writer John Bell left out them out. He said, “[this] seemingly outrageous curse is better dealt with in preaching [thanks a lot!] or group conversation. It should not be forgotten, especially by those who have never known exile, dispossession or the rape of people and land.”<sup>5</sup>

So, here it goes, the part we’d rather go away:

*Remember, LORD, what the Edomites did  
on Jerusalem’s dark day:  
“Rip it down, rip it down!  
All the way to its foundations!” they did say.*

*Daughter Babylon, you destroyer.  
A blessing for whoever pays you back  
with the same you did to us!  
A blessing for whoever seizes your kids  
and smashes them against the rock!<sup>6</sup>*

The Psalm’s Refugee prosecutes the case.

*You’ve seen the evidence, God. What they did. The Edomites (Israel’s ancestral antagonists) they cheered our destruction.<sup>7</sup> The Babylonians grabbed and smashed, even our children. Your verdict, Judge! Your sentence! Should it not be the same, the same back to them?*

Justice demands a price.

Notice, though, that the Psalm’s Refugee then leaves it. Leaves the rage in the hands of the only One who is truly just and perfectly merciful, who knows and loves all the little children: the smashed and the smashers! The Refugee demands justice, and entrusts it to God.

Still, we have this ugly demand. Can we, who talk a good game about justice, be humble enough to be quiet and listen to justice’s raw rage? Will we be able to entrust them, and their bitter pain to God?

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<sup>5</sup> John L. Bell. *Psalms of Patience, Protest and Praise*. (Glasgow, Scotland: Wild Goose Publications, 1998). Quoted in this article: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm\\_137](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psalm_137)

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 137:7-9 (Common English Bible).

<sup>7</sup> For a prophet’s description of Edom’s complicity, see the Book of Obadiah.

V

This Psalm is not quite a prayer. Only a bit of it is spoken to God. Perhaps the Refugee hopes that God will nonetheless overhear.

If so, then the Refugee is right.

Not only is God on the side of the Refugee. Not only is God partial to the Refugee. For the sake of the Refugee, and—this is scandalous—for the sake of the Refugee's oppressor, God becomes the refugee.

I am a Christian. I see Jesus.

God the Son himself, newly born, became a refugee from a tyrant's terror, a tyrant who smashed babies.

God the Son himself, who is at home in the entire cosmos and beyond, came among us, and found no place to lay his head for a rest.

God the Son himself became banished, to a place outside Jerusalem's by-then-rebuilt walls. On his cross, the Refugee . . . exiled from nobility, from dignity, from righteousness, from life, from humanity. He took into himself the oppressors' evil, the bystanders' indifference, the refugees' broken rage. He took upon himself justice's ugly price.

And so, he redeemed it all, healed it all, saved us. As only the Refugee God could. He did. Christ Jesus.

Refugees among us . . . refugees who are us . . . we belong to him . . . and him, with us.

Thanks be to God.