

# DON'T HANG UP THE HARP

Rev. Lawrence Baldrige

July 20, 2008

## Psalm 137

Psalm 137 is one of those psalms that are perfectly beautiful but brutally honest. It was obviously written by an unknown pilgrim taken prisoner to Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar's crushing defeat of Jerusalem. It is the only imprecatory prayer of cursing in the Psalms. The Psalmist, whoever he was, sang this lament with a broken heart and a crippled spirit. Each line of this psalm drips blood and tears.

The most telling part of this psalm to me is when the psalmist says, "We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof." The Jerusalem prisoners, being carried away captive to Babylon, refused to play their music and refused to sing their song in that strange land. They left their lyres upon the limbs of the trees.

Like the psalmist the circumstances of life oftentimes causes us to 'hang it up' if you please. We also either do hang up our harps, or, we are at least sorely tempted to do so. My message to you this morning is this: Don't Hang Up Your Harp! You still have music to play; you still have a song to sing.

Let us look at the ways in which we Hang Up Our Harps.

**I. WE FIRST HANG UP OUR HARPS WHEN WE PUT CURSINGS BEFORE BLESSINGS.** I am certainly not condemning the psalmist who first uttered a curse against himself if he forgot Jerusalem; who secondly condemned the Edomites, their cousins, for their joy in seeing Jerusalem destroyed; and who lastly condemned Babylon in a brutal way of wishing their children 'dashed against the stones.' After the psalmist got all of this out of his system, he might have felt better and been more able to handle his situation. I understand how he felt. As others have said, "I've been there myself." But it really does no good to put cursings above blessings. God put us in this world to be a blessing to the rest of the world, therefore we should be praying for our enemies and not cursing them. When cursings replace blessings we have already hung up the harp.

A. First of all, let us not curse ourselves. We are poor, weak, human beings; and we are going to fail. No, not *going* to fail. The Bible says, "There is none righteous no not one." We are already failures. Part of the psalmist's lament comes from his own inadequacy in his particular situation. He sought to be adequate by at least refusing to sing the Lord's song in a strange land, and by hanging up the harp, thereby refusing to give the Babylonians any entertainment. That was perhaps the only thing he could control, and he did control that.

Should we, however, withhold our talents and our blessings from others just because we can? Let us not curse ourselves in our attempt to gain a small victory when we have lost the larger victory. Bitter and painful are the consequences of failure; but worse still are the consequences of hanging up the harp.

B. We must not curse ourselves—or the Edomites. ". . . if you love your country why is it necessary to hate other countries? —Arthur Miller, Incident at Vichy. The Edomites were directly related to Judea and Israel, but they hated Israel. When Judea

fell, when Jerusalem was defeated, when the Temple was utterly destroyed, the Edomites were there as a mob cheering on the conquering Babylonians. The Edomites were cursing Jerusalem, and so the psalmist cursed the Edomites.

Furthermore the Babylonians were exceedingly vicious in their destruction of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar wanted to show these disloyal Jerusalemites that they could not get by with their refusal to pay tribute to the most powerful kingdom in the world of that day. Yet we know, do we not, how the psalmist felt? Are we not Americans, proud Americans, who love our country with every fiber of our being. As the writer Sinclair Lewis said in an interview in Berlin before the 2<sup>nd</sup> WW: “Intellectually I know that America is no better than any other country; emotionally I know she is better than every other country.” The City of God destroyed! The Temple desecrated and devastated! I am not at all surprised at the behavior of the Psalmist. What he didn’t reckon with—this was the will of God. Charles Spurgeon once said “Be not proud of race, face, place, or grace.” But, like this exile, we sometimes are too proud.

“Man is like an onion,” said A. T. Pierson, “layer after layer, and each a layer of self in some form. Strip off self-righteousness and you will come to self-trust. Get beneath this and you will come to self-seeking and self-pleasing. Even when we think these are abandoned, self-will betrays its presence. When this is stripped off, we come to self-defense, just as the Corinthians did--the word of the puffed up--and last of all, self-glory. When this seems to be abandoned, the heart of the human onion discloses pride that boasts of being truly humble.” This psalmist wasn’t worried about humility, nor was he very accepting of the will of God. So, He Hung Up the Harp. He blamed the Edomites and the Babylonians for Judea’s fate.

“A man can fail many times but he isn’t a failure until he begins to blame somebody else.” —Anonymous

**II. WE HANG UP THE HARP WHEN WE PUT HATE BEFORE LOVE.** Can’t we say the same thing about the psalmist here? His cursings came from putting Hate Before Love, and for not realizing that a God of Love was at work disciplining His People. Jerusalem lay in ruins! The Temple, robbed of all its precious things, lay in absolute ruins! How could this be happening to God’s people? How could it be happening to them? Curse your enemy! Hate your oppressors! Deprive them of your music! Sing for them no song! They are beasts! They are monsters! Hate them with everlasting hatred!

William Lloyd Garrison once said, “We may be personally defeated, but our principles never.” But their principles were defeated. They could not see the hand of God in their defeat. They did not realize that God was preparing them to be stronger in their future. In Babylon they would recognize that their God was indeed a Universal God, a God who was with them in Babylon as He was with them in Jerusalem. In Babylon, also, they would develop the Synagogue that became for them a place where the God of Judaism could be worshipped as surely as he could in their most precious Temple. In Babylon, as in the Wilderness before that, they became truly the ‘people of God.’

Why can’t we love our enemies? Jesus did. Moreover, He told us to love our enemies as well as to bless those who cursed us. Then He said we ought to pray for them. Norman Peale said that he once talked to a parishioner who had a business in town that was pretty near a competitor’s business. During the visit the parishioner admitted

that he despised the competitor. After all, the man would break him financially if he could; and he would do the same. Peale asked the man to try something—to pray for the competitor every day and see how that worked for him. The businessman reluctantly agreed. Later he told Peale how it went. He said, “The first time I prayed for him I told God, ‘Now you know I don’t mean a word of this, but I promised I would do it.’” Then he revealed that after a few weeks and months he really learned to pray for his competition. Then he started reaching out to the man. In brief, after a year or so the two of them became best friends. Love grew as a result of prayer.

Don’t hate! Remember the poem by Richard Rodgers:  
You've got to be taught to be afraid  
Of people whose eyes are oddly made  
And people whose skin is a different shade  
You've got to be carefully taught

You've got to be taught before it's too late  
Before you are six or seven or eight  
To hate all the people your relatives hate  
You've got to be carefully taught  
You've got to be carefully taught.

I am not saying that it is easy to Love our Enemies, but I am saying that with the help of God we can love our enemies even. The help of God most often comes with prayer. “You have not because you ask not.”

Can I love those Edomites who laughed at me when I was down? Can I love those family members who should have supported me in my time of sadness but did not? Can I love those people who laughed at me and made sport of my misery? No, I cannot! At least I cannot in my own strength. But I can keep praying until God turns my hate to Love; for God is Love.

And how about those Babylonians who destroyed the City of God, the City of David, the Holy City, and the Temple as well—can I love them? No, not without God. And not without accepting the Will of God. If I put Hate before Love, I have Hung Up My Harp, and the Music that has stopped is the music of my own soul.

**III. WE HANG UP THE HARP WHENEVER WE PUT DESPAIR BEFORE HOPE.** Years ago, I read a book by James Stewart of Scotland in which he said, in essence, that the modern man vacillates between hope and despair. Thomas hung up his harp when Jesus died. When told that Jesus was alive, he said, “I won’t believe unless I can place my finger into the nail prints of his hand, and place my hand in the sword wound in his side.” He may have doubted, but He was honest. The truth as he saw it was that Jesus died, was buried, and would rot in that tomb. His hopes had been shattered. He would not let it happen again. He was repeating the words of our psalmist, “I will not sing the Lord’s song in a strange land, and don’t you expect me to.” He was saying, “I’ve already hung up my harp. The music has stopped!” Thank God, he saw the resurrected Christ in the Upper Room that next Lord’s Day, and he cried out, “My Lord, and My God!”

Many other saints of God have been tempted across the years to hang up their harps—Moses, Jonah, Elijah, Job, Jeremiah, just to name a few. Remember how Moses smote the rock; remember Jonah crashing under the shade of a gourd bush; remember Elijah under the juniper tree; remember Job reproaching the day of his birth; remember Jeremiah weeping a fountain of tears. Remember Jesus crying out in the words of a psalm, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me.” Don’t tell any sensitive soul that life is easy, that everything is rosy and good. Sensible people know just how hard life is, and how difficult it sometimes is to hope. Yet we know the Bible is right when it tells us that ‘hope is an anchor of the soul.’ In 1cor 13, Paul writes, “and now abideth faith, hope, and charity (love).” James Lane Allen once said, “When you say a situation or a person is hopeless, you are slamming the door in the face of God.” That is true, but life is what it is, and it is sometimes brutal and troubling as it was to this psalmist. The easiest thing in the world in such situations is to lose hope and to hang up the harp, and to say to life, “The party’s over..”

That must not, however, be the last word. With hope the party has just begun. G.K. Chesterton once said, “There is no medicine like hope, no incentive so great, and no tonic so powerful as expectation of something better tomorrow.” How could the psalmist have known that the years spent in Babylon would be so eventful for the Jews and also so creative? But they were. Emily Dickinson said, “Hope is a thing with feathers, / That perches in the soul.” What she was saying was that we really cannot live abundantly without hope. The hopeless soul is dead; the soul that hopes is alive.

From what we see in the lives of others, we all know that we should be a blessing and not a curse, that we should love others and not hate them, and that we should cling to hope and never lose hope. This message is to you; **Don’t hang up your harp.** God has beautiful music for you to play. Don’t stop singing. This world is as strange land, but you can still sing the Lord’s song in it! God has music for you to play still, and a song for you to sing. Play your harp! Sing your song! Please, don’t hang up the harp!