

# Exposition on Psalm 137

by St. Augustine

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*The sermon exhorts listeners to remember Jerusalem in the height of their joy and not forget it, lest they be dumb to God, and to repay Babylon as she has served them.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 136:1-9

**Topics:** "Spiritual Warfare", "Heavenly Citizenship"

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## Description

St. Augustine preaches about the contrast between the holy Jerusalem and the waters of Babylon, symbolizing the fleeting pleasures and temptations of the world. He emphasizes the importance of humbling ourselves in captivity, resisting the allure of worldly joys, and remembering our true home in Jerusalem. St. Augustine urges believers to hold onto their spiritual 'instruments of music' even in the midst of Babylon, symbolizing God's Scriptures, commands, and promises. He warns against being led captive by earthly desires and encourages the faithful to sing the Lord's song even in a foreign land, staying true to their heavenly citizenship.

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## Transcript

1. ...But today we have sung, By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered Sion Psalm 136:1....

2. Observe the waters of Babylon. The waters of Babylon are all things which here are loved, and pass away. One man, for example, loves to practise husbandry, to grow rich thereby, to employ his mind therein, thence to gain pleasure: let him observe the issue, and see that what he has loved is not a foundation of Jerusalem, but a stream of Babylon. Another says, It is a grand thing to be a soldier: all husbandmen fear those who are soldiers....

3. But then other citizens of the holy Jerusalem, understanding their captivity, mark how the natural wishes and the various lusts of men hurry and drag them hither and there, and drive them into the sea; they see this, and they throw not themselves into the waters of Babylon, but sit down and weep, either for those who are being carried away by them, or themselves whose deserts have placed them in Babylon, but sitting, that is, humbling themselves. O holy Sion, where all stands firm and nothing flows! Who has thrown us headlong into this? Why have we left your Founder and your society? Behold, placed where all things are flowing and gliding away, scarce one, if he can grasp the tree, shall be snatched from the stream and escape. Humbling ourselves then in our captivity, let us sit by the waters of Babylon, let us not dare to plunge ourselves in those streams, nor to be proud and lifted up in the evil and sadness of our captivity,

but let us sit, and so weep. Let us sit by the waters, not beneath the waters, of Babylon; such be our humility, that it overwhelm us not. Sit by the waters, not in the waters, not under the waters; but yet sit, in humble fashion, talk not as you would in Jerusalem....

4. For many weep with the weeping of Babylon, because they rejoice also with the joy of Babylon. When men rejoice at gains and weep at losses, both are of Babylon. You ought to weep, but in the remembrance of Sion. If you weep in the remembrance of Sion, you ought to weep even when it is well with you in Babylon....

5. On the willows in the midst thereof we hung up our instruments of music Psalm 136:2. The citizens of Jerusalem have their instruments of music, God's Scriptures, God's commands, God's promises, meditation on the life to come; but while they are dwelling in Babylon, they hang up their instruments. Willows are unfruitful trees, and here so placed, that no good whatever can be understood of them: elsewhere perhaps there may. Here understand barren trees, growing by the waters of Babylon. These trees are watered by the waters of Babylon, and bring forth no fruit; just as there are men greedy, covetous, barren in good works, citizens of Babylon in such wise, that they are even trees of that region; they are fed there by these pleasures of transitory things, as though watered by the waters of Babylon. You seek fruit of them, and nowhere findest it....Therefore by deferring to apply the Scriptures to them, we hang up our instruments of music upon the willows. For we hold them not worthy to carry our instruments. We do not therefore insert our instruments into them and bind them to them, but defer to use them, and so hang them up. For the willows are the unfruitful trees of Babylon, fed by temporal pleasures, as by the waters of Babylon.

6. For there they that led us captive demanded of us words of songs, and they that led us away, an hymn Psalm 136:3. They demanded of us words of songs and an hymn, who led us captive....We are tempted by the delights of earthly things, and we struggle daily with the suggestions of unlawful pleasures; scarce do we breathe freely even in prayer: we understand that we are captives. But who led us captive? What men? What race? What king? If we are redeemed, we once were captives. Who has redeemed us? Christ. From whom has He redeemed us? From the devil. The devil then and his angels led us captive: and they would not lead us, unless we consented....

7. Those then who have led us captive, the devil and his angels, when have they spoken unto us: Sing us one of the songs of Sion? What answer we? Babylon bears you, Babylon contains you, Babylon nourishes you, Babylon speaks by your mouth, you know not to take in save what glitters for the present, you know not how to meditate on things of eternity, you take not in what you ask. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? Psalm 136:4. Truly, brethren, so it is. Begin to wish to preach the truth in such measure as you know it, and see how needful it is for you to endure such mockers, persecutors of the truth, full of falsehood. Reply to them, when they ask of you what they cannot take in, and say in full confidence of your holy song, How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land!

8. But take heed how you dwell among them, O people of God, O body of Christ, O high-born band of wanderers (for your home is not here, but elsewhere), lest when you love them, strivest for their friendship, and fearest to displease such men, Babylon begin to delight you and thou forget Jerusalem. In fear then of this, see what the Psalmist subjoins, see what follows. If I forget you, O Jerusalem Psalm 136:5, amid the speeches of those who hold me captive, amid the speeches of treacherous men, amid the speeches of men who ask with ill intent, asking, yet unwilling to learn....What then? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget me.

9. Let my tongue cleave to my jaws, if I remember not you Psalm 136:6. That is, let me be dumb, he says, if I remember not you. For what word, what sound does he utter, who utters not songs of Sion? That is our tongue, the song of Jerusalem. The song of the love of this world is a strange tongue, a barbarous tongue, which we have learned in our captivity. Dumb then will he be to God, who forgets Jerusalem. And it is not enough to remember: for her enemies too remember her, desiring to overthrow her. What is that city? say they; who are the Christians? What sort of men are the Christians? Would they were not Christians. Now the captive band has conquered its capturers; still they murmur, and rage, and desire to slay the holy city that dwells as a stranger among them. Not enough then is it to remember: take heed how you remember. For some things we remember in hate, some in love. And so, when he had said, If I forget you, O Jerusalem, etc., he added at once, if I prefer not Jerusalem in the height of my joy. For there is the height of joy where we enjoy God, where we are safe of united brotherhood, and the union of citizenship. There no tempter shall assail us, no one be able so much as to urge us on to any allurements: there nought will delight us but good: there all want will die, there perfect bliss will dawn on us.

10. Then he turns to God in prayer against the enemies of that city. Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom Psalm 136:7. Edom is the same who is also called Esau: for you heard just now the words of the Apostle read, Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated. Romans 9:13 ...Esau then signifies all the carnal, Jacob all the spiritual....All carnal persons are enemies to spiritual persons, for all such, desiring present things, persecute those whom they see to long for things eternal. Against these the Psalmist, looking back to Jerusalem, and beseeching God that he may be delivered from captivity, says-- what? Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom. Deliver us from carnal men, from those who imitate Esau, who are elder brethren, yet enemies. They were first-born, but the last-born have won the pre-eminence, for the lust of the flesh has cast down the former, the contempt of lust has lifted up the latter. The other live, and envy, and persecute. In the day of Jerusalem. The day of Jerusalem, wherein it was tried, wherein it was held captive, or the day of Jerusalem's happiness, wherein it is freed, wherein it reaches its goal, wherein it is made partaker of eternity? Remember, says he, O Lord, forget not those who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof. Remember then, it means, that day wherein they willed to overthrow Jerusalem. For how great persecutions has the Church suffered! How did the children of Edom, that is, carnal men, servants of the devil and his angels, who worshipped stocks and stones, and followed the lusts of the flesh, how did they say, Extirpate the Christians, destroy the Christians, let not one remain, overthrow them even to the foundation! Have not these things been said? And when they were said, the persecutors were rejected, the martyrs crowned....

11. Then he turns himself to her, O daughter of Babylon, unhappy; unhappy in your very exulting, your presumption, your enmity; unhappy daughter of Babylon! Psalm 136:8. The city is called both Babylon, and daughter of Babylon: just as they speak of Jerusalem and the daughter of Jerusalem, Sion and the daughter of Sion, the Church and the daughter of the Church. As it succeeds the other, it is called daughter; as it is preferred before the other, it is called mother. There was a former Babylon; did the people remain in it? Because it succeeds to Babylon, it is called daughter of Babylon. O daughter of Babylon, unhappy thou!...

12. Happy shall he be that repays you, as you have served us. What repayment means he? Herewith the Psalm closes, Happy, that takes and dashes your little ones against the rock Psalm 136:9. Her he calls unhappy, but him happy who pays her as she has served us. Do we ask, what reward? This is the repayment. For what has that Babylon done to us? We have already sung in another Psalm, The words of the wicked have prevailed against us. For when we were born, the confusion of this world found us, and

choked us while yet infants with the empty notions of various errors. The infant that is born destined to be a citizen of Jerusalem, and in God's predestination already a citizen, but meanwhile a prisoner for a time, when learns he to love ought, save what his parents have whispered into his ears? They teach him and train him in avarice, robbery, daily lying, the worship of various idols and devils, the unlawful remedies of enchantments and amulets. What shall one yet an infant do, a tender soul, observing what its elders do, save follow that which it sees them doing. Babylon then has persecuted us when little, but God has given us when grown up knowledge of ourselves, that we should not follow the errors of our parents....How shall they repay her? As she has served us. Let her little ones be choked in turn: yea let her little ones in turn be dashed, and die. What are the little ones of Babylon? Evil desires at their birth. For there are, who have to fight with inveterate lusts. When lust is born, before evil habit gives it strength against you, when lust is little, by no means let it gain the strength of evil habit; when it is little, dash it. But you fear, lest though dashed it die not; Dash it against the Rock; and that Rock is Christ. 1 Corinthians 10:4

13. Brethren, let not your instruments of music rest in your work: sing one to another songs of Sion. Readily have ye heard; the more readily do what you have heard, if you wish not to be willows of Babylon fed by its streams, and bringing no fruit. But sigh for the everlasting Jerusalem: whither your hope goes before, let your life follow; there we shall be with Christ. Christ now is our Head; now He rules us from above; in that city He will fold us to Himself; we shall be equal to the Angels of God. We should not dare to imagine this of ourselves, did not the Truth promise it. This then desire, brethren, this day and night think on. Howsoever the world shine happily on you, presume not, parley not willingly with your lusts. Is it a grown-up enemy? Let it be slain upon the Rock. Is it a little enemy? Let it be dashed against the Rock. Slay the grown-up ones on the Rock, and dash the little ones against the Rock. Let the Rock conquer. Be built upon the Rock, if you desire not to be swept away either by the stream, or the winds, or the rain. If you wish to be armed against temptations in this world, let longing for the everlasting Jerusalem grow and be strengthened in your hearts. Your captivity will pass away, your happiness will come; the last enemy shall be destroyed, and we shall triumph with our King, without death.

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